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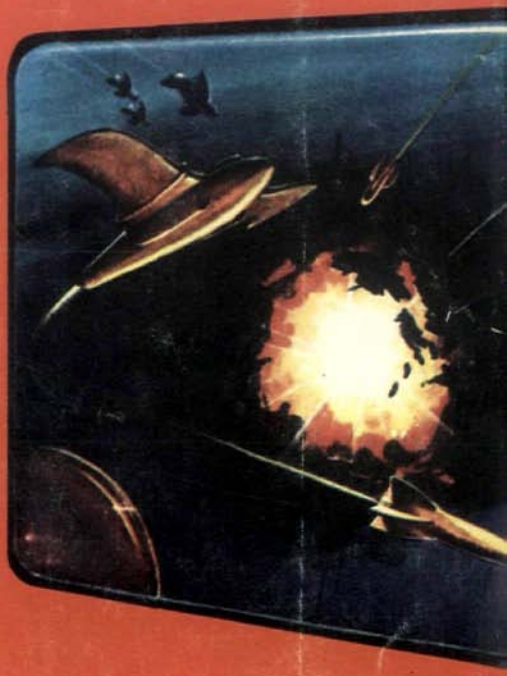

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GREAT SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE, is published quarterly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364 at 50¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (4 issues) U.S. and possessions: $1.65: Canada and Pan American Union Countries: $2.00; all other countries: $2.50.

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Several months ago a magazine named Playboy, *which concentrates editorially on girls, books, girls, art, girls, music, fashion, girls, and girls, published an article about old-time science-fiction. Called "Girls for the Slime God," it was illustrated with synthetic covers of non-existent sf magazines, each replete with bug-eyed monster, mad scientist, and partially naked, nubile girl.*

But the article quickly disillusioned the reader. It bemoaned the fact that current sf magazines seem to abjure sex. Evidently to titillate its readers, the Playboy *article then went on to quote some of the allegedly erotic descriptions from sf magazines of a generation ago. But even then, it seems,* Playboy *had a hard time finding sexy stuff. It acknowledges that only one magazine, even in those days, went around regularly ripping the clothes off earth-girls and exposing their ivory bosoms.*

We at Amazing *felt kind of sorry for the* Playboy *people. You know, no more really exciting stuff in the sf mags, and all that. How're you going to get your kicks any more if these sf writers start talking about cultural taboos instead of heaving breasts? Compassion is our middle name. We commissioned one of sf's most sex-appealing writers to create a story especially for the insatiable Playboy, and to prove to him that sf has not forgotten that S-X is the most important thing in the Universe.*

PLAYBOY AND THE SLIME GOD

By ISAAC ASIMOV

Illustrated by SUMMERS

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BUT these are two species," said Captain Garm, peering closely at the creatures that had been brought up from the planet below. His optic organs adjusted focus to maximum sharpness, bulging outwards as they did so. The color patch above them gleamed in quick flashes.

Botax felt warmly comfortable to be following color-changes once again, after months in a spy cell on the planet, trying to make sense out of the modulated sound waves emitted by the natives. Communication by flash was almost like being home in the far-off Perseus arm of the Galaxy. "Not two species," he said, "but two forms of one species."

"Nonsense, they look quite different. Vaguely Perse-like, thank the Entity, and not as disgusting in appearance as so many outforms are. Reasonable shape, recognizable limbs. But no color-patch. Can they speak?"

"Yes, Captain Garm," Botax indulged in a discreetly disapproving prismatic interlude. "The details are in my report. These creatures form sound waves by way of throat and mouth, something like complicated coughing. I have learned to do it myself." He was quietly proud. "It is very difficult."

"It must be stomach-turning. Well, that accounts for their flat, unextensible eyes. Not to speak by color makes eyes largely useless. Meanwhile, how can you insist these are a single species? The one on the left is smaller and has longer tendrils, or whatever it is, and seems differently proportioned. It bulges where this other does not. —Are they alive?"

"Alive but not at the moment conscious, Captain. They have been psycho-treated to repress fright in order that they might be studied easily."

"But are they worth study? We are behind our schedule and have at least five worlds of greater moment than this one to check and explore. Maintaining a time-stasis unit is expensive and I would like to return them and go on—"

But Botax's moist spindly body was fairly vibrating with anxiety. His tubular tongue flicked out and curved up and over his flat nose, while his eyes sucked inward. His splayed three-fingered hand made a gesture of negation as his speech went almost entirely into the deep red.

"Entity save us, Captain, for no world is of greater moment to us than this one. We may be facing a supreme crisis. These creatures could be the most dangerous life-forms in the Galaxy, Captain, just *because* there are two forms."

"I don't follow you."

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"Captain, it has been my job to study this planet, and it has been most difficult, for it is unique. It is so unique that I can scarcely comprehend its facets. For instance, almost all life on the planet consists of species in two forms. There are no words to describe it, no concepts even. I can only speak of them as first form and second form. If I may use their sounds, the little one is called 'female,' and the big one, here, 'male', so the creatures themselves are aware of the difference."

Garm winced, "What a disgusting means of communication."

"And, Captain, in order to bring forth young, the two forms must cooperate."

The Captain, who had bent forward to examine the specimens closely with an expression compounded of interest and revulsion, straightened at once. "Cooperate? What nonsense is this? There is no more fundamental attribute of life than that each living creature bring forth its young in innermost communication with itself. What else makes life worth living?"

"The one form does bring forth life but the other form must cooperate."

"How?"

"That has been difficult to determine. It is something very private and in my search through the available forms of literature I could find no exact and explicit description. But I have been able to make reasonable deductions."

Garm shook his head. "Ridiculous. Budding is the holiest, most private function in the world. On tens of thousands of worlds it is the same. As the great photobard, Levuline, said, "In budding-time, in budding time, in sweet, delightful budding time; when . . . '"

"Captain, you don't understand. This cooperation between forms brings about somehow (and I am not certain exactly how) a mixture and recombination of genes. It is a device by which in every generation, new combinations of characteristics are brought into existence. Variations are multiplied; mutated genes hastened into expression almost at once where under the usual budding sytem, millennia might pass first."

"Are you trying to tell me that the genes from one individual can be combined with those of another? Do you know how completely ridiculous that is in the light of all the principles of cellular physiology?"

"It must be so," said Botax nervously under the others popeyed glare. "Evolution *is* hastened. This planet is a riot of species. There are supposed to be a million and a quarter different species of creatures."

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"A dozen and a quarter more likely. Don't accept too completely what you read in the native literature."

"I've seen dozens of radically different species myself in just a small area. I tell you, Captain, give these creatures a short space of time and they will mutate into intellects powerful enough to overtake us and rule the Galaxy."

"Prove that this cooperation you speak of exists, Investigator, and I shall consider your contentions. If you cannot, I shall dismiss all your fancies as ridiculous and we will move on."

"I can prove it." Botax's color-flashes turned intensely yellow-green. "The creatures of this world are unique in another way. They foresee advances they have not yet made, probably as a consequence of their belief in rapid change which, after all, they constantly witness. They therefore indulge in a type of literature involving the space-travel they have never developed. I have translated their term for the literature as 'science-fiction.' Now I have dealt in my readings almost exclusively with science-fiction, for there I thought, in their dreams and fancies, they would expose themselves and their danger to us. And it was from that science-fiction that I deduced the method of their inter-form cooperation."

"How did you do that?"

"There is a periodical on this world which sometimes publishes science-fiction which is, however, devoted almost entirely to the various aspects of the cooperation. It does not speak entirely freely, which is annoying, but persists in merely hinting. Its name as nearly as I can put it into flashes is 'Recreationlad.' The creature in charge, I deduce, is interested in nothing but inter-form cooperation and searches for it everywhere with a systematic and scientific intensity that has roused my awe. He has found instances of cooperation described in science-fiction and I let material in his periodical guide me. From the stories he instanced I have learned how to bring it about.

"And Captain, I beg of you, when the cooperation is accomplished and the young are brought forth before your eyes, give orders not to leave an atom of this world in existence."

"Well," said Captain Garm, wearily, "bring them into full consciousness and do what you must do quickly."

MARGE SKIDMORE was suddenly completely aware of her surroundings. She remembered very clearly the elevated station at the beginning of twilight. It had been almost empty, one man standing near her, another at the other end of the plat-

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form. The approaching train had just made itself known as a faint rumble in the distance.

There had then come the flash, a sense of turning inside out, the half-seen vision of a spindly creature, dripping mucus, a rushing upward, and now—

"Oh, God," she said, shuddering. "It's still here. And there's another one, too."

She felt a sick revulsion, but no fear. She was almost proud of herself for feeling no fear. The man next to her, standing quietly, but still wearing a battered fedora, was the one who had been near her on the platform.

"They got you, too?" she asked. "Who else?"

Charlie Grimwold, feeling flabby and paunchy, tried to lift his hand to remove his hat and smooth the thin hair that broke up but did not entirely cover the skin of his scalp and found that it moved only with difficulty against a rubbery but hardening resistance. He let his hand drop and looked morosely at the thin-faced woman facing him. She was in her middle thirties, he decided, and her hair was nice and her dress fit well, but at the moment, he just wanted to be somewhere else and it did him no good at all that he had company; even female company.

He said, "I don't know, lady. I was just standing on the station platform."

"Me, too," Marge said quickly.

"And then I see a flash. Didn't hear nothing. Now here I am. Must be little men from Mars or Venus or one of them places."

Marge nodded vigorously, "That's what I figure. A flying saucer? You scared?"

"No. That's funny, you know. I think maybe I'm going nuts or I *would* be scared."

"Funny thing. I ain't scared, either. Oh, God, here comes one of them now. If he touches me, I'm going to scream. Look at those wiggly hands. And that wrinkled skin, all slimy; makes me nauseous."

Botax approached gingerly and said, in a voice at once rasping and screechy, this being the closest he could come to imitating the native timbre, "Creatures! We will not hurt you. But we must ask you if you would do us the favor of cooperating."

"Hey, it talks!" said Charlie. "What do you mean, cooperate."

"Both of you. With each other," said Botax.

"Oh?" He looked at Marge. "You know what he means, lady?"

"Ain't got no idea whatsoever," she answered loftily.

Botax said, "What I mean—" and he used the short term he had once heard employed as a synonym for the process.

Marge turned red and said, "What!" in the loudest scream

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she could manage. Both Botax and Captain Garm put their hands over their mid-regions to cover the auditory patches that trembled painfully with the decibels.

Marge went on rapidly, and nearly incoherently. "Of all things. I'm a married woman, you. If my Ed was here, you'd hear from *him*. And you, wise guy," she twisted toward Charlie against rubbery resistance, "Whoever you are, if you think —"

"Lady, lady," said Charlie in uncomfortable desperation. "It ain't my idea. I mean, far be it from me, you know, to turn down some lady, you know; but me, I'm married, too. I got three kids. Listen—"

Captain Garm said, "What's happening, Investigator Botax? These cacophonous sounds are awful."

"Well," Botax flashed a short purple patch of embarrassment. "This forms a complicated ritual. They are supposed to be reluctant at first. It heightens the subsequent result. After that initial stage, the skins must be removed."

"They have to be *skinned?*"

"Not really skinned. Those are artificial skins that can be removed painlessly, and must be. Particularly in the smaller form."

"All right, then. Tell it to remove the skins. Really, Botax, I don't find this pleasant."

"I don't think I had better tell the smaller form to remove the skins. I think we had better follow the ritual closely. I have here sections of those space-travel tales which the man from the 'Recreationlad' periodical spoke highly of. In those tales the skins are removed forcibly. Here is a description of an accident, for instance 'which played havoc with the girl's dress, ripping it nearly off her slim body. For a second, he felt the warm firmness of her half-bared bosom against his cheek—' It goes on that way. You see, the ripping, the forcible removal, acts as a stimulus."

"Bosom?" said the Captain. "I don't recognize the flash."

"I invented that to cover the meaning. It refers to the bulges on the upper dorsal region of the smaller form."

"I see. Well, tell the larger one to rip the skins off the smaller one. —What a dismal thing this is."

Botax turned to Charlie. "Sir," he said, "rip the girl's dress nearly off her slim body, will you? I will release you for the purpose."

Marge's eyes widened and she twisted toward Charlie in instant outrage. "Don't you dare do that, you. Don't you *dast* touch me, you sex maniac."

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"Me?" said Charlie plaintively, "It ain't my idea. You think I go around ripping dresses? Listen," he turned to Botax, "I got a wife and three kids. She finds out I go around ripping dresses, I get clobbered. You know what my wife does when I just look at some dame. *Listen—*"

"Is he still reluctant?" said the Captain, impatiently.

"Apparently," said Botax. "The strange surroundings, you know, may be extending that stage of the cooperation. Since I know this is unpleasant for you, I will perform this stage of the ritual myself. It is frequently written in the space-travel tales that an outer-world species performs the task. For instance, here," and he riffled through his notes finding the one he wanted, "they describe a very awful such species. The creatures on the planet have foolish notions, you understand. It never occurs to them to imagine handsome individuals such as ourselves, with a fine mucous cover."

"Go on! Go on! Don't take all day," said the Captain.

"Yes, Captain. It says here that the extraterrestrial 'came forward to where the girl stood. Shrieking hysterically, she was cradled in the monster's embrace. Talons ripped blindly at her body, tearing the kirtle away in rags.' You see, the native creature is shrieking with stimulation as her skins are removed."

"Then go ahead, Botax, remove it. But please, allow no shrieking. I'm trembling all over with the sound waves."

Botax said politely to Marge, "If you don't mind—"

One spatulate finger made as though to hook on to the neck of the dress.

Marge wiggled desperately. "Don't touch. Don't touch! You'll get slime on it. Listen, this dress cost $24.95 at Ohrbach's. Stay away, you monster. Look at those eyes on him." She was panting in her desperate efforts to dodge the groping, extra terrestrial hand. "A slimy, bug-eyed monster, that's what he is. Listen, I'll take it off myself. Just don't touch it with slime, for God's sake."

She fumbled at the zipper, and said in a hot aside to Charlie, "Don't you dast look."

Charlie closed his eyes and shrugged in resignation.

She stepped out of the dress. "All right? You satisfied?"

Captain Garm's fingers twitched with unhappiness. "Is that the bosom? Why does the other creature keep its head turned away?"

"Reluctance. Reluctance," said Botax. "Besides, the bosom is still covered. Other skins must be removed. When bared, the bosom is a very strong stimulus. It is

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constantly described as ivory globes, or white spheres, or otherwise after that fashion. I have here drawings, visual picturizations, that come from the outer covers of the space-travel magazines. If you will inspect them, you will see that upon every one of them, a creature is present with a bosom more or less exposed."

The Captain looked thoughtfully from the illustrations to Marge and back. "What is ivory?"

"That is another made-up flash of my own. It represents the tusky material of one of the large sub-intelligent creatures on the planet."

"Ah," and Captain Garm went into a pastel green of satisfaction. "That explains it. This small creature is one of a warrior sect and those are tusks with which to smash the enemy."

"No, no. They are quite soft, I understand." Botax's small brown hand flicked outward in the general direction of the objects under discussion and Marge screamed and shrank away.

"Then what other purpose do they have?"

"I think," said Botax with considerable hesitation, "that they are used to feed the young."

"The young eat them?" asked the Captain with every evidence of deep distress.

"Not exactly. The objects produce a fluid which the young consume."

"Consume a fluid from a living body? Yech-h-h." The Captain covered his head with all three of his arms, calling the central supernumerary into use for the purpose, slipping it out of its sheath so rapidly as almost to knock Botax over.

"A three-armed, slimy, bug-eyed monster," said Marge.

"Yeah," said Charlie.

"All right you, just watch those eyes. Keep them to yourself."

"Listen, lady. I'm trying not to look."

Botax approached again. "Madam, would you remove the rest?"

Marge drew herself up as well as she could against the pioning field. "Never!"

"I'll remove it, if you wish."

"Don't touch! For God's sake, don't touch. Look at the slime on him, will you? All right, I'll take it off." She was muttering under her breath and looking hotly in Charlie's direction as she did so.

NOTHING is happening," said the Captain, in deep dissatisfaction, "and this seems an imperfect specimen."

Botax felt the slur on his own efficiency. "I brought you two perfect specimens. What's wrong with the creature?"

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"The bosom does not consist of globes or spheres. I know what globes or spheres are and in these pictures you have shown me, they are so depicted. Those are large globes. On this creature, though, what we have are nothing but small flaps of dry tissue. And they're discolored, too, partly."

"Nonsense," said Botax. "you must allow room for natural variation. I will put it to the creature herself."

He turned to Marge, "Madam, is your bosom imperfect?"

Marge's eyes opened wide and she struggled vainly for moments without doing anything more than gasp loudly. *"Really!"* she finally managed. "Maybe I'm no Gina Lollobrigida or Anita Ekberg, but I'm perfectly all right, thank you. Oh, boy, if my Ed were only here." She turned to Charlie. "Listen, you, you tell this bug-eyed slimy thing here, there ain't nothing wrong with my development."

"Lady," said Charlie, softly. "I ain't looking, remember?"

"Oh, sure, you ain't looking. You been peeking enough, so you might as well just open your crummy eyes and stick up for a lady, if you're the least bit of a gentleman, which you probably ain't."

"Well," said Charlie, looking sideways at Marge, who seized the opportunity to inhale and throw her shoulders back, "I don't like to get mixed up in a kind of delicate matter like this, but you're all right,—I guess."

"You *guess?* You blind or something? I was once runner-up for Miss Brooklyn, in case you don't happen to know and where I missed out was on waist-line, *not* on—"

Charlie said, "All right, all right. They're fine. Honest." He nodded vigorously in Botax's direction. "They're okay. I ain't that much of an expert, you understand, but they're okay by me."

Marge relaxed.

Botax felt relieved. He turned to Garm. "The bigger form expresses interest, Captain. The stimulus is working. Now for the final step."

"And what is that?"

"There is no flash for it, Captain. Essentially, it consists of placing the speaking-and-eating apparatus of one against the equivalent apparatus of the other. I have made up a flash for the process, thus: kiss."

"Will nausea never cease?" groaned the Captain.

"It is the climax. In all the tales, after the skins are removed by force, they clasp each other with limbs and indulge madly in burning kisses, to translate as nearly as possible the phrase most frequently used. Here is one example, just one, taken at ran-

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dom: 'He held the girl, his mouth avid on her lips.'"

"Maybe one creature was devouring the other," said the Captain.

"Not at all," said Botax impatiently. "Those were burning kisses."

"How do you mean, burning? Combustion takes place?"

"I don't think literally so. I imagine it is a way of expressing the fact that the temperature goes up. The higher the temperature, I suppose, the more successful the production of young. Now that the big form is properly stimulated, he need only place his mouth against hers to produce young. The young will not be produced without that step. It is the cooperation I have been speaking of."

"That's all? Just this—" The Captain's hands made motions of coming together, but he could not bear to put the thought into flash form.

"That's all," said Botax. "In none of the tales; not even in 'Recreationlad,' have I found a description of any further physical activity in connection with young-bearing. Sometimes after the kissing, they write a line of symbols like little stars, but I suppose that merely means more kissing; one kiss for each star, when they wish to produce a multitude of young."

"Just one, please, right now."

"Certainly, Captain."

Botax said with grave distinctness, "Sir, would you kiss the lady?"

Charlie said, "Listen, I can't move."

"I will free you, of course."

"The lady might not like it."

Marge glowered. "You bet your damn boots, I won't like it. You just stay away."

"I would like to, lady, but what do they do if I don't? Look, I don't want to get them mad. We can just—you know—make like a little peck."

She hesitated, seeing the justice of the caution. "All right. No funny stuff, though. I ain't in the habit of standing around like this in front of every Tom, Dick and Harry, you know."

"I know that, lady. It was none of my doing. You got to admit that."

Marge muttered angrily, "Regular slimy monsters. Must think they're some kind of gods or something, the way they order people around. Slime gods is what they are!"

Charlie approached her. "If it's okay now, lady." He made a vague motion as though to tip his hat. Then he put his hands awkwardly on her bare shoulders and leaned over in a gingerly pucker.

Marge's head stiffened so that lines appeared in her neck. Their lips met.

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Captain Garm flashed fretfully. "I sense no rise in temperature." His heat-detecting tendril had risen to full extension at the top of his head and remained quivering there.

"I don't either," said Botax, rather at a loss, "but we're doing it just as the space travel stories tell us to. I think his limbs should be more extended— Ah, like that. See, it's working."

Almost absently, Charlie's arm had slid around Marge's soft, nude torso. For a moment, Marge seemed to yield against him and then she suddenly writhed hard against the pinioning field that still held her with fair firmness.

"Let go." The words were muffled against the pressure of Charlie's lips. She bit suddenly, and Charlie leaped away with a wild cry, holding his lower lip, then looking at his fingers for blood.

"What's the idea, lady?" he demanded plaintively.

She said, "We agreed just a peck, is all. What were you starting there? What's going on around here? First these slimy creatures make like their gods and now this. You some kind of playboy or something?"

CAPTAIN GARM flashed rapid alternations of blue and yellow. "Is it done? How long do we wait now?"

"It seems to me it must happen at once. Throughout all the universe, when you have to bud, you bud, you know. There's no waiting."

"Yes? After thinking of the foul habits you have been describing, I don't think I'll ever bud again. —Please get this over with."

"Just a moment, Captain."

But the moments passed and the Captain's flashes turned slowly to a brooding orange, while Botax's nearly dimmed out altogether.

Botax finally asked hesitantly, "Pardon me, madam, but when will you bud?"

"When will I *what?*"

"Bear young?"

"I've got a kid."

"I mean bear young now."

"I should say not. I ain't ready for another kid yet."

"What? What?" demanded the Captain. "What's she saying?"

"It seems," said Botax, weakly, "she does not intend to have young at the moment."

The Captain's color patch blazed brightly. "Do you know what I think, Investigator? I think you have a sick, perverted mind. Nothing's happening to these creatures. There is no cooperation between them, and no young to be borne. I think they're two different species and that you're playing some kind of foolish game with me."

"But Captain—" said Botax.

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"Don't 'but Captain' me," said Garm. "I've had enough. You've upset me, turned my stomach, nauseated me, disgusted me with the whole notion of budding and wasted my time. You're just looking for headlines and personal glory and I'll see to it that you don't get them. Get rid of these creatures now. Give that one its skins back and put them back where you found them. I ought to take the expense of maintaining Time-stasis all this time out of your salary."

"But, Captain—"

"Back, I say. Put them back in the same place and at the same instant of time. I want this planet untouched, and I'll see to it that it stays untouched." He cast one more furious glance at Botax. "One species, two forms, bosoms, kisses, cooperation, BAH— You are a fool, Investigator, a dolt as well and, most of all, a sick, sick, sick creature."

There was no arguing. Botax, limbs trembling, set about returning the creatures.

THEY stood there at the elevated station, looking around wildly. It was twilight over them, and the approaching train was just making itself known as a faint rumble in the distance.

Marge said, hesitantly, "Mister, did it really happen?"

Charlie nodded. "I remember it. Listen. I'm sorry you was embarrassed. It was none of my doing. I mean, you know, lady, you wasn't really bad. In fact, you looked good, but I was kind of embarrassed to say that."

She smiled. "It's all right."

"You want maybe to have a cup of coffee with me just to relax you. My wife, she's not really expecting me for a while."

"Oh? Well, Ed's out of town and my little boy is visiting at my mother's. I don't have to rush home."

"Come on, then. We been kind of introduced."

"I'll say." She laughed.

They had a couple of cocktails and then Charlie couldn't let her go home in the dark alone, so he saw her to her door. Marge was bound to invite him in for a few moments.

*

Meanwhile, back in the spaceship, the crushed Botax was making a final effort to prove his case. While Garm prepared the ship for departure Botax hastily set up the tight-beam visiscreen for a last look at his specimens. He focused in on Charlie and Marge in her apartment. His tendril stiffened and he began flashing in a coruscating rainbow of colors.

"Captain Garm! Captain! "Look what they're doing now!"

But at that very instant the ship winked out of Time-stasis.

THE END

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a DUSK of IDOLS

By JAMES BLISH

Illustrated by SUMMERS

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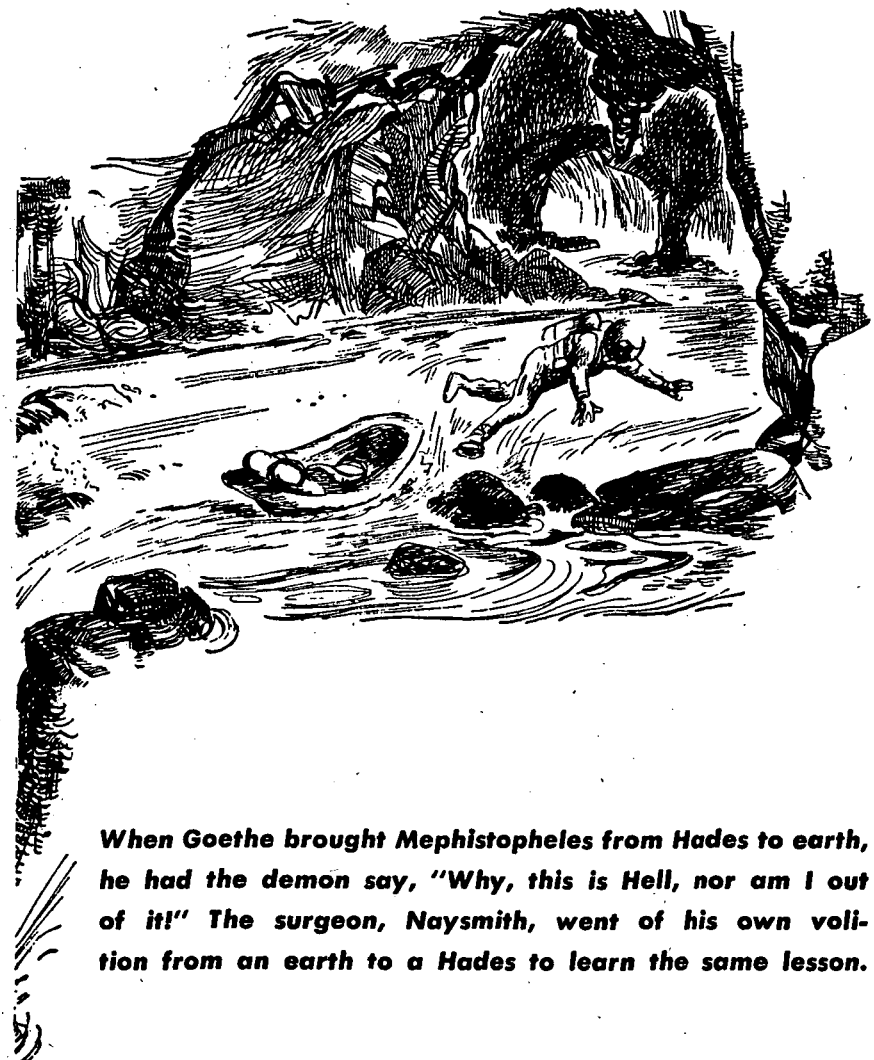

When Goethe brought Mephistopheles from Hades to earth, he had the demon say, "Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it!" The surgeon, Naysmith, went of his own volition from an earth to a Hades to learn the same lesson.

I CAN TELL you now what happened to Naysmith. He hit Chandala.

Quite by coincidence—he was on his way home at the time—but it caught him. It was in all respects a most peculiar accident. The chances were against it, including that I should have heard anything about it.

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Almost everyone in Arm II knows that Chandala is, pre-eminently among civilized planets, a world in mortal agony—and a world about which, essentially, nothing can be done. Naysmith didn't know it. He had had no experience of Arm II and was returning along it from his first contact with the Heart stars when his ship (and mine) touched Chandala briefly. He was on his way back to Earth (which technically is an Arm II planet, but so far out in the hinterlands that no Earthman ever thinks of it as such) when this happened, and since it happened during ship's night, he would never have known the difference if it hadn't been for an attack of simple indigestion which awakened him—and me.

It's very hard to explain the loss of so eminent a surgeon as Naysmith without maligning his character, but as his only confidant, more or less, I don't seem to have much of a choice. The fact is that he should have been the last person in the Galaxy to care about Chandala's agony. He had used his gifts to become exclusively a rich man's surgeon; as far as I know he had never done any time in a clinic after his residency days. He had gone to the Heart stars only to sterilize, for a very large fortune in fees, the sibling of the Bbiben of Bbenaf—for the fees, and for the additional fortune the honor would bring him later. Bbenaf law requies that the operation be performed by an off-worlder, but Naysmith was the first Earthman to be invited to do it.

But if during the trip there or back some fellow passenger had come down with a simple appendicitis, Naysmith wouldn't have touched him. He would have said, with remote impartiality, that that was the job of the ship's surgeon (me). If for some reason I had been too late to help, Naysmith still would not have lifted a finger.

There are not supposed to be any doctors like that, but there are. Nobody should assume that I think they are in the majority—they are in fact very rare—but I see no point in pretending that they don't exist. They do; and the eminent Naysmith was one of them. He was in fact almost the Platonic ideal of such a doctor. And you do not have to be in the Heart stars to begin to think of the Hippocratic Oath as being quaint, ancient and remote. You can become isolated from it just as easily on Earth, by the interposition of unclimbable mountains of money, if you share Naysmith's temperament.

His temperament, to put it very simply, was that of a pathologically depressed man carrying a terrible load of anxiety.

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In him, it showed up by making him a hypochondriac, and I don't think he would ever have gone into medicine at all had it not been for an urgent concern about his own health which set in while he was still in college. I had known him slightly then, and was repelled by him. He was always thinking about his own innards. Nothing pleased him, nothing took him out of himself, he had no eye for any of the elegance and the beauty of the universe outside his own skin. Though he was as brilliant a man as I ever knew, he was a bore, the kind of bore who replies to "How are you?" by telling you how he is, in clinical detail. He was forever certain that his liver or his stomach or some other major organ had just quit on him and was going to have to be removed—probably too suddenly for help to be summoned in time.

It seems inarguable to me, though I am not a psychologist, that he took up medicine primarily in the hope (unrecognized in his own mind) of being able to assess his own troubles better, and treat them himself when he couldn't get another doctor to take them as seriously as he did. Of course this did not work. It is an old proverb in medicine that the man who treats himself has a fool for a physician, which is only a crude way of saying that the doctor-patient relationship absolutely requires that there be two people involved. A man can no more be his own doctor than he can be his own wife, no matter how much he knows about marriage or medicine.

The result was that even after becoming the kind of surgeon who gets called across 50,000 light-years to operate on the sibling of the Bbiben of Bbenaf, he was still a hypochondriac. In fact he was worse off than ever, because he now had the most elaborate and sophisticated knowledge of all the obscure things that might be wrong with him. He had a lifelong case of interne's syndrome, the cast of mind which makes beginners in medicine sure that they are suffering from everything they have just read about in the textbook. He knew this; he was, as I have said, a brilliant man; though he had reached his ostensible goal, he was now in a position where he did not *dare* to treat himself, even for the hiccups.

And this was why he called me at midnight, ship's time, to look him over. There was nothing curable the matter with him. He had eaten something on Bbenaf—though he was a big, burly, bearded man, immoderate eating had made him unpleasantly soft—that was having trouble accommodating itself to his Terres-

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trial protein complement. I judged that tomorrow he would have a slight rash, and thereafter the episode would be over. I told him so.

"Um. Yes. Daresay you're right. Still rather a shock though, to be brought bolt up right like that in the middle of the night."

"Of course. However I'm sure it's nothing more than a slight food allergy—the commonest of all tourist complaints," I added, a little maliciously. "The tablets are anti-histaminic, of course. They ought to head off any serious sequelae, and make you a little sleepy to boot. You could use the relaxation, I think."

He nodded absently, without taking any apparent notice of my mean little dig. He did not recognize me, I'm quite sure. It had been a long time since college.

"Where are we?" he said. He was wide awake, though his alarm reaction seemed to be wearing off, and he didn't seem to want to take my hint that he use the pills as sleepy drugs; he wanted company, at least for a little while. Well, I was curious, too. He was an eminent man in my own profession, and I had an advantage over him: I knew more about him than he thought I did. If he wanted to talk, I was delighted to let him.

"Chandala, I believe. A real running sore of a planet, but we won't be here long; it's just a message stop."

"Oh? What's the matter with the place? Barbaric?"

"No, not in the usual sense. It's classified as a civilized planet. It's just sick, that's all. Most of the population is being killed off."

"A pandemic?" Naysmith said slowly. "That doesn't sound like a civilized planet."

"It's hard to explain," I said. "It's not just one plague. There are scores of them going. I suppose the simple way to put it is to say that the culture of Chandala doesn't believe in sanitation—but that's not really true either. They believe in it, thoroughly, but they don't practice it very much. In fact a large part of the time they practice it in reverse."

"In reverse? That doesn't make any sense."

"I warned you it was hard to explain. I mean that public health there is a privilege. The ruling classes make it unavailable to the people they govern, as a means of keeping them in line."

"But that's insane!" Naysmith exclaimed.

"I suppose it is, by our ideals. It's obviously very hard to keep under control, anyhow; the rulers often suffer as much as the ruled. But all governments are

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based on the monopoly of the right to use violence—only the weapons vary from planet to planet. This one is Chandala's. And the Heart stars have decided not to interfere."

HE FELL SILENT. I probably had not needed to remind him that what the federation we call the Heart stars decided to do, or not to do, was often very difficult to riddle. Its records reach back about a million years, which however cover only its period of stability. Probably it is as much as twice that old. No Arm II planet belonged to the group yet. Earth could be expected to be allowed to join in about 45,000 years—and that was what remained of half our originally allotted trial period; the cut was awarded us after our treaty with the star-dwelling race of Angels. In the meantime, we could expect no help . . . nor could Chandala. Earth was fortunate to be allowed any intercourse whatsoever with the Heart stars; there again, we could thank the Angels—who live forever—for vouching for us.

"Dr. Rosenbaum," Naysmith said slowly, "do you think that's right and proper?"

So he had recognized me after all. He would never have bothered to look up my name on the roster.

"Well, no, I suppose not. But the rule is that every planet is to be allowed to go to hell in its own handbasket. It isn't my rule, or the Earth's rule; but there it is. The Heart stars just won't be bothered with any world that can't achieve stability by itself. They have seen too many of them come and go."

"I think there's more to it than that. Some of the planets that failed to get into the federation failed because they got into planet-wide wars—or into wars with each other."

"Sure," I said, puzzled. "That's just the kind of thing the Heart stars have no use for."

"So they didn't interfere to stop the wars."

"No." Now I was beginning to see what he was driving at, but he bore down on me relentlessly all the same.

"So there is in fact no Heart star rule that we can't help Chandala if we want to. In fact doing so may not even prejudice our case with the federation. We just don't know."

"I suppose that's true, but—"

"And in fact it might help us? We don't know that either?"

"No, we don't," I admitted, but my patience was beginning to run out. It had been a long night. "All we do know is that the Heart stars follow certain rules of their own. Common sense suggests that our chances would be best if we followed them too."

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"Common sense for our remotely imaginable great-great-greatest of grandchildren, maybe. But by then conditions will have changed beyond our remotest imaginings. Half a millennium!"

"They don't change in the Heart stars. That's the whole point—stability. And above all I'd avoid picking up a stick of TDX like Chandala. It's obviously just the kind of non-survival planet the Heart stars *mean* to exclude by their rules. There'd be nothing you could do with it but blow yourself up. And there's obviously nothing we could do for it, anyhow!"

"Gently now, Doctor. Are you sure of that? Sanitation isn't the only public-health technique there is."

"I don't follow you," I said. The fact is that by now I wasn't trying very hard.

"Well," Naysmith said, "consider that there was once a thing called the Roman Empire. It owned all the known world and lasted many centuries. But fifty men with modern weapons could have conquered it, even when it was at its most powerful."

"But the Heart stars—"

"I am not talking about the Heart stars. I'm talking about Chandala. Two physicians with modern field kits could have wiped out almost all the diseases that raddled the Roman Empire. For instance, you and I."

I swallowed and looked at my watch. We were still a good two hours away from takeoff time.

"No, Doctor, you'll have to answer me. Shall we try it?"

I could still stall, though I was not hopeful that it would help me much. "I don't understand your motives, Dr. Naysmith. What do you want to try it *for?* The Chandalese are satisfied with their system. They won't thank you for trying to upset it. And where's the profit? I can't see any."

"What kind of profit are you talking about?" Naysmith said, almost abstractedly.

"Well . . . I don't know; that's what I'm asking you. It seems to me you shouldn't lack for money by now. And as for honor, you're up to your eyebrows in that already, and after Bbenaf you'll have much more. And yet you seem to be proposing to throw all that away for a moribund world you never heard of until tonight. And your life, too. They would kill you instantly down there if they knew what you had in mind."

"I don't plan to tell the ruling class, whatever that is, what I have in mind," Naysmith said. "I have that much sense. As for my motives . . . they're properly my own. But I can satisfy your curiosity a little. I know what you see when you look at

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me: a society doctor. It's not an unusual opinion. My record supports it. Isn't that true?"

I didn't nod, but my silence must have given my assent.

"Yes, it's true, of course. And if I had excuses, I wouldn't give a damn for your opinion—or for Chandala. But you see, I don't. I not only know what the opinion of me is, but *I share it myself*. Now I see a chance to change that opinion of me; not yours, but mine. Does that help you any?"

"It did. Every man has his own holy grail. Naysmith had just identified his.

"I wish you luck."

"But you won't go along?"

"No," I said, miserable, yet defiantly sure that there were *no* good reasons why I should join Naysmith's quest—not even the reason that it could not succeed without me and my field kit. It could not succeed with me, either; and my duty lay with the ship, until the day when I might sight my own Grail, whatever that might be. All the same, that one word made me feel like an assassin.

But it did not surprise Naysmith. He had had the good sense to expect nothing else. Whatever the practical notions that had sprung into his head in the last hour or so, and I suppose they were many, he must have known all his life—as we all do—that Grail-hunting is essentially the loneliest of hobbies.

HE MADE HIMSELF wholly unpopular on the bridge, which up to now had barely known he was aboard, wangling a ship's gig and a twenty-four hour delay during which he could be force-fed the language of the nearest city-state by a heuristics expert, and then disembarked. The arrangement was that we were to pick him up on our next cruise, a year from now.

If he had to get off the planet before then, he could go into orbit and wait; he had supplies enough. He also had his full field medical kit, including a spacesuit. Since it is of the nature of Chandalese political geography to shift without notice, he agreed to base himself on the edge of a volcanic region which we could easily identify from space, yet small enough so that we wouldn't have to map it to find the gig.

Then he left. Everything went without incident (he told me later) until he entered the city-state of Gandu, whose language he had and where our embassy was. He had of course been told that the Chandalese, though humanoid, are three times as tall as Earthmen, but it was a little unnerving all the same to walk among them. Their size suited their world, which was a good 12,000 miles in diameter. Sur-

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prisingly, it was not very dense, a fact nobody had been able to explain, since it was obviously an Earthlike planet; hence there was no gravitational impediment to growing its natives very large, and grow large they had. He would have to do much of his doctoring here on a stepladder, apparently.

The charge d'affairs at the embassy, like those of us on ship, did his best to dissuade Naysmith.

"I don't say that you can't do something about the situation here," he said. "Very likely you can. But you'll be meddling with their social structure. Public health here is politics, and vice versa. The Heart stars—"

"Bother the Heart stars," Naysmith said, thereby giving the charge d'affairs the worst fright he had had in years. "If it can be done, it ought to be done. And the best way to do it is to go right to the worst trouble spot."

"That would be Iridu, down the river some fifteen miles," the charge d'affairs said. "Dying out very rapidly. But it's proscribed, as all those places are."

"Criminal. What about language?"

"Oh, same as here. It's one of three cities that spoke the same tongue. The third one is dead."

"Where do I go to see the head man?"

"To the sewer. He'll be there."

Naysmith stared.

"Well, I'm sorry, but that's the way things are. When you came through the maij plaza here, did you see two tall totem poles?"

"Yes."

"The city totems always mark the local entrance to the Grand Sewer of Chandala, and the big stone building behind them is always where the priest-chief lives. And I'm warning you, Dr. Naysmith, he won't give you the time of day."

Naysmith did not bother to argue any more. It seemed to him that no matter how thoroughly a chieftan may subscribe to a political system, he becomes a rebel when it is turned against him—especially if as a consequence he sees his people dying all around him. He left, and went downriver, on a vessel rather like a felucca.

He had enough acumen to realize very early that he was being trailed. One of the two Chandalese following him looked very like a man who had been on duty at the embassy. He did not let it bother him, and in any event, they did not seem to follow him past the gates of Iridu.

He found the central plaza easily enough—that is to say, he was never lost; the physical act of getting through the streets

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was anything but easy, though he was towing his gear on an anti-grav unit. They were heaped with refuse and bodies. Those who still lived made no attempt to clear away the dead or help the dying, but simply sat in the doorways and moaned. The composite sound thrummed through the whole city. Now and then he saw small groups scavenging for food amid all the garbage; and quite frequently he saw individuals drinking from puddles. This last fact perplexed him particularly, for the charge d'affairs had told him plainly that Chandala boasted excellent water supply systems.

The reception of the chief-priest was hostile enough, more so than Naysmith had hoped, yet less than the charge d'affairs had predicted—at least at first. He was obviously sick himself, and seemingly had not bathed in a long time, nor had any of his attendants; but as long as all Naysmith wanted was information, he was grudgingly willing to give it.

"What you observe are the Articles of the Law and their consequences," he said. "Because of high failures before the gods, Iridu and all its people have been abased to the lowest caste; and since it is not meet that people of this caste speak the same tongue as the Exalted, the city is proscribed."

"I can understand that," Naysmith said, guardedly. "But why should that prevent you from taking any care of yourselves? Drinking from puddles—"

"These are the rules for our caste," the priest-chief said. "Not to wash; not to eat aught less than three days old; not to aid the sick or bury the dead. Drinking from puddles is graciously allowed us."

There was no apparent ironic intention in the last sentence. Naysmith said, "Graciously?"

"The water in the city's plumbing now comes directly from the Grand Sewer. The only other alternative is the urine of the abah, but that is for holy men doing penance for the people."

This was a setback. Without decent water he would be sadly handicapped, and obviously what came out of the faucets was not under the control of the doomed city.

"Well, we'll manage somehow. Rain barrels should serve for the time being; I can chlorinate them for you. But it's urgent to start cleaning things up, otherwise I'll never be able to keep up with all the new cases. Will you help me?"

The priest-chief looked blank. "We can help no one any more, little one."

"You could be a big help. I can probably stop this plague for you, with a few willing hands."

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The priest-chief stood up, shakily, but part of his shakiness was black rage. "To break the rules of caste is the highest of failures before the gods," he said. "We are damned to listen to such counsels! Kill him!"

Naysmith was fool enough to pause to protest. Only the fact that most of the gigantic soldiers in the chamber were clumsy with disease, and unused to dealing with so small an object as he, got him out of the building alive. He was pursued to the farther gate of Iridu by a shambling and horrible mob, all the more frightening because there was hardly a healthy creature in its rank.

Outside, he was confronted by a seemingly trackless jungle. He plunged in at hazard, and kept going blindly until he could no longer hear the noise of the pack; evidently they had stopped at the gate. He could thank the proscription of the city-nation for that.

On the other hand, he was lost.

Of course, he had his compass, which might help a little. He did not want to go westward, which would take him back to the river, but also into the vicinity of Iridu again. Besides, his two trackers from Gandu might still be lurking at the west gate, and this time their hostility might be a good deal more active. Striking north-north-west toward Gandu itself was open to the same objection. There seemed to be nothing for it but to go north-north-east, in the hope of arriving at the field of fumaroles and hot springs where his ship was, there to take thought.

He was still utterly determined to try again; shaken though he was, he was convinced that this first failure was only a matter of tactics. But he did have to get back to the ship.

He pushed forward through the wiry tangle. It made it impossible for him to follow a straight compass course; he lost hours climbing and skirting and hacking, and began to worry about the possibility of spending the night in this wilderness. With the thought, there was a sodden thump behind him, and he was stopped as though he had run into a wall. Then there was a diminishing crackle and bumping over his head.

What was holding him back, he realized after a moment, was the tow to his gear. He backtracked. The gear was lying on the moist ground. Some incredibly tough vine had cut the antigrav unit free of it; the other sound he heard had been the unit fighting its way skyward.

Now what? He could not possibly drag all this weight. It occurred to him that he might put on the spacesuit; that would slow him a good deal, but it

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would also protect him from the underbrush, which had already slashed him pretty painfully. The rest of the load—a pack and two oxygen bottles—would still be heavy, but maybe not impossibly so.

He got the suit on, though it was difficult without help, and lumbered forward again. It was exhausting, even with the suit's air-conditioning to help, but there was nothing he could do about that. At least, if he had to sleep in the jungle, the suit might also keep out vermin, and some larger entities. . . .

For some reason, however, the Chandalese forest seemed peculiarly free of large animals. Occasional scamperings and brief glimpses told of creatures which might have been a little like antelope, or like rabbits, but even these were scarce; and there were no cries of predators. This might have been because Chandalese predators were voiceless, but Naysmith doubted this on grounds of simple biology; it seemed more likely that most of the more highly organized wild life of Chandala had long since been decimated by the plagues the owners of the planet cultivated as though they were ornamental gardens.

LATE in the afternoon, the fates awarded him two lucky breaks. The first of these was a carcas, or rather, a shell. It was the greenish-brown carapace of some creature which, from its size, he first took to be the Chandalese equivalent of a huge land-turtle, but on closer examination seemed actually to have been a good deal more like a tick. Well, if any planet had ticks as big as rowboats, it would be Chandala, that much was already plain even to Naysmith. In any event, the shell made an excellent skid for his gear, riding on its back through the undergrowth almost as though it had been designed for the task.

The second boon was the road. He did not recognize it as such at first, for it was much broken and overgrown, but on reflection he decided that this was all to the good; a road that had not been in use for a long time would be a road on which he would be unlikely to meet anybody. It would also not be likely to take him to any populated place, but it seemed to be headed more or less in the direction he wanted to go; and if it meandered a little, it could hardly impose upon him more detours than the jungle did.

He took off the spacesuit and loaded it into the skid, feeling almost cheerful.

It was dusk when he rounded the bend and saw the dead city. In the gathering bloom, it looked to be almost twice the size of

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Gandu, despite the fact that much of it had crumbled and fallen.

At its open gates stood the two Chandalese who had followed him downriver, leaning on broad-bladed spears as tall as they were.

Naysmith had a gun; and he did not hesitate.

Had he not recognized the face of the Chandalese from the charge d'affairs' office, he might have assumed that the two guards were members of some savage tribe. Again, it seemed to him, he had been lucky.

It might be the last such stroke of luck. The presence of the guards testified, almost in letters of fire, that the Chandalese could predict his route with good accuracy—and the spears testified that they did not mean to let him complete it.

Again, it seemed to him that his best chance led through the dead city, protected while he was there by its proscription. He could only hope that the firelands lay within some reachable distance of the city's other side.

The ancient gate towered over him like the Lion Gate of Mycena as remembered from some nightmare—fully as frowning as that narrow, heavy, tragedy-ridden breach, but more than five times as high. He studied it with sober respect, and perhaps even a little dread, before he could bring himself to step over the bodies of the guards and pass through it. When he did, he was carrying with him one of the broad-bladed fifteen-foot spears, because, he told himself, you never could tell when such a lever might come in handy . . . and because, instinctively, he believed (though he later denied it) that no stranger could pass under that ancient arch without one.

The Atridae, it is very clear, still mutter in their sleep not far below the surface of our waking minds, for all that we no longer allow old Freud to cram our lives back into the strait-jackets of those old religious plays. Perhaps one of the changes in us that the Heart stars await is the extirpation of these last shadows of Oedipus, Elektra, Agamemnon and all those other dark and bloody figures from the way we think.

Or maybe not. There are still some 40,000 years to go. If after that they tell us that that was one of the things they were waiting for, we probably won't understand what they're talking about.

Carrying the spear awkwardly and towing his belongings behind him in the tick-shell, Naysmith plodded toward the center of the dead city. There was nothing left in the streets but an oc-

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casional large bone; one that he stumbled over fell promptly to shivers and dust. The scraping noise of his awkward sledge echoed off the fronts of the leaning buildings; otherwise there was no sound but the end-stopped thuds of his footfalls, and an occasional bluster of evening wind around the tottering, flaking cornices far above his bent head.

In this wise he came draggingly at last into the central plaza, and sat down on a drum of a fallen stone pillar to catch his breath. It was now almost full dark, so dark that nothing cast a shadow any more; instead, the night seemed to be soaking into the ground all around him. There would be, he knew already, no stars; the atmosphere of Chandala was too misty for that. He had perhaps fifteen minutes more to decide what he was going to do.

As he mopped his brow and tried to think, something rustled behind him. Freezing, he looked carefully over his shoulder, back toward the way he had come. Of course he saw nothing; but in this dead silence a sound like that was easy to interpret.

They were still following him. For him, this dead city was not a proscripted sanctuary. Or if it ever had been, it was no longer, since he had killed the two guards.

He stood up, as soundlessly as he could. All his muscles were aching; he felt as soft and helpless as an overripe melon. The shuffling noise stopped at once.

They were already close enough to see him!

He knew that he could vanish quickly enough into any of the tomb-like buildings around him, and evade them for a while as deftly as any rat. They probably knew this labyrinth little better than he did, and the sound of their shuffling did not suggest that there were many of them—surely not a large enough force to search a whole city for a man only a third as big as a Chandalese. And they would have to respect taboos that he could scamper past out of simple ignorance.

But if he took that way, he would have to abandon his gear. He could carry his medical kit easily enough, but that was less important to him now than the space-suit and its ancillary oxygen bottles—both heavy and clumsy, and both furthermore painted white. As long as he could drag them with him in the tick-shell their whiteness would be masked to some extent; but if he had to run with them, he would surely be brought down.

In the last remains of the evening, he stood cautiously forward and inched the sledge toward the center of the plaza, clenching the spear precariously

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against his side under one armpit, his gun in his other hand. Behind him, something went, *Scuffle . . . . rustle . . .*

As he had seen on arrival, the broad-mouthed well in the center of the plaza, before the house of the dead and damned priest-chief, was not flanked by the totems he had been taught to expect. Where they should be jutted only two grey and splintered stumps, as though the poles had been pushed over by brute force and toppled into the abyss. On the other side of the well, a stone beast—an abah?—stared forever downward with blind eyes, ready to rend any soul who might try to clamber up again from Hell.

As it might try to do; for a narrow, railless stone stairway, slimy and worn, spiralled around the well into the depths.

Around the mouth of the well, almost impossible to see, let alone interpret, in the last glimmers, was a series of bas-reliefs, crudely and hastily cut; he could detect the rawness of the sculpturing even under the weathering of the stone and the moss.

He went cautiously down the steps a little way to look at them. With no experience whatsoever of Chandalese graphic conventions, he knew that he had litttle chance of understanding them even had he seen them in full daylight. Nevertheless, it was clear that they told a history . . . and, it seemed to him, a judgment. This city had been condemned, and its totems toppled, because it had been carrying on some kind of congress with the Abyss.

He climbed back to the surface of the plaza, pulling his nose thoughtfully. They were still following him, that was sure. But would they follow him down there? It might be a way to get to the other side of the dead city which would promise him immunity—or at least, a temporary sanctuary of an inverted kind.

He did not delude himself that he could live down there for long. He would have to wear the spacesuit again, and breathe nothing but the oxygen in the white bottles. He could still keep by him the field medical kit with which he had been planning to re-enrich his opinion of himself, and save a planet; but even with this protection he could not for long breathe the air and drink the water of the pit. As for food, that hardly mattered, because his air and water would run out much sooner.

Let it be said that Naysmith was courageous. He donned the spacesuit again, and began the descent, lowering his tick-shell coracle before him on a short taut tether. Bump, bump, bump went the shell down the steps ahead of him, teetering on its

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back ridge, threatening to slip sidewise and fall into the well at every irregularity in the slimy old platforms. Then he would stop in the blackness and wait until he could no longer hear it rocking. Then down again: bump, bump, bump; step, step, step. Behind him, the butt of the spear scraped against the wall; and once the point lodged abruptly in some chink and nearly threw him.

He had his chest torch going, but it was not much help; the slimy walls of the well seemed to soak up the light, except for an occasional delusive reflection where a rill of seepage oozed down amid the nitre. Down, down, down.

After some centuries he no longer expected to reach the bottom. There was nothing left in his future but this painful descent. He was still not frightened; only numb, exhausted, beyond caring about himself, beyond believing in the rest of the universe.

Then the steps stopped, sending him staggering in the suit. He touched the wall with a glove —he imagined that he could feel its coldness, though of course he could not—and stood still. His belt radios brought him in nothing but a sort of generalized echo, like running water.

Of course. He flashed the chest-light around, and saw the Grand Sewer of Chandala.

He was standing on what appeared to be a wharf made of black basalt, over the edge of which rushed the black waters of an oily river, topped with spinning masses of soapy froth. He could not see the other side, nor the roof of the tunnel it ran in—only the sullen and ceaseless flood, like a cataract of ink. The wharf itself had evidently been awash not long since, for there were still pools standing sullenly wherever the black rock had been worn down; but now the surface of the river was perhaps a foot below the level of the dock.

He looked up. Far aloft, he saw a spot of blue-black sky about the size of a pea, and gleaming in it, one reddish star. Though he was no better a judge of distance than any other surgeon or some other man who spends his life doing close work, he thought he was at least a mile beneath the surface. To clamber back up there would be utterly beyond him.

But why a wharf? Who would be embarking on this sunless river, and why? It suggested that the river might go toward some other inhabited place . . . or some place that had once been inhabited. Maybe the Chandalese had been right in condemning the city to death for congress with the pit—and if that Other

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Place were inhabited even now, it was probably itself underground, and populated by whatever kind of thing might enjoy and prosper by living in total darkness by the side of a sewer—

There was an ear-splitting explosion to Naysmith's right, and something struck his suit just under his armpit. He jerked his light toward the sound, just in time to see fragments of rock scampering away across the wet wharf, skidding and splashing. A heavier piece rolled eccentrically to the edge of the dock and dropped off into the river. Then everything was motionless again.

He bent and picked up the nearest piece. It was part of one of the stones of the staircase.

There was no sanctuary, even here; they were following him down. In a few moments it might occur to them to stone him on purpose; the suit could stand that, but the helmet could not. And above all he had to keep his air pure.

He had to go on. But there was no longer any walk-way; only the wharf and the sewer. Well, then, that way. Grimly he unloaded the tick-shell and lowered it into the black water, hitching its tether to a basalt post. Then, carefully, he ballasted it with the pack and the oxygen bottles. It rocked gently in the current, but the ridge along its back served as a rudimentary keel; it would be stable, more or less.

He sat down on the edge of the wharf and dangled his feet into his boat while he probed for the bottom of the river with the point of the spear. The point caught on something after he had thrust nearly twelve feet of the shaft beneath the surface; and steadying himself with this, he transferred his weight into the coracle and sat down.

Smash! Another paving stone broke on the dock. A splinter, evidently a large one, went whooshing past his helmet and dropped into the sewer. Hastily he jerked the loop of the tether off the basalt post, and poled himself hard out into the middle of the torrent.

THE wharf vanished. The shell began to turn round and round. After several minutes, during which he became deathly seasick, Naysmith managed to work out how to use the blade of the spear as a kind of steering oar; if he held it hard against one side of the shell at the back, and shifted the shaft with the vagaries of the current, he could at least keep his frail machine pointed forward.

There was no particular point in steering it any better than that, since he did not know where he was going.

The chest-light showed him

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nothing except an occasional glimpse of a swiftly-passing tunnel wall, and after a while he shut it off to conserve power, trusting to his sense of balance to keep his shell headed forward and in the middle of the current. Then he struck some obstacle which almost upset him; and though he fought himself back into balance again, the shell seemed sluggish afterwards. He put on the light and discovered that he had shipped so much of the slimy water that the shell was riding only a few inches above the roiling river.

He ripped the flap of his pack open and found a cup to bail with. Thereafter, he kept the light on.

After a while, the noise of the water took on a sort of hissing edge. He hardly noticed it at first; but soon it became sharp, like the squeak of a wet finger on the edge of a glass, and then took on deeper tones until it made the waters boil like the noise of a steam whistle. Turning the belt radio down did him very little good; it dropped the volume of the sound, but not its penetrating quality.

Then the coracle went skidding around a long bend and light burst over him.

He was hurtling past a city, fronted by black basalt docks like the one he had just quitted, but four or five times more extensive. Beyond these were ruins, as far as he could see, tumbled and razed, stark in the unwavering flare of five tall smokeless plumes of gas flames which towered amid the tumbled stones. It was these five fountains of blue-white fire, as tall as sequoias, which poured out the vast organ-diapason of noise he had heard in the tunnel.

They were probably natural, though he had never seen anything like them before. The ruins, much more obviously, were not; and for them there was no explanation. Broken and aged though they were, the great carved stones still preserved the shapes of geometrical solids which could not possibly have been reassembled into any building Naysmith could imagine, though as a master surgeon he had traded all his life on structural visualization. The size of the pieces did not bother him, for he had come to terms with the fact that the Chandalese were three times as tall as men, but their shapes were as irrational as the solid geometry of dream.

And the crazy way in which the city had been dumped over, as though something vast and stupid had sat down in the middle of it and lashed a long heavy tail, did not suggest that its destroyers had been Chandalese either.

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Then it was gone. He clung to his oar, keeping the coracle pointed forward. He did not relish the thought of going on to a possible meeting with the creatures who had razed that city; but obviously there had been no hope for him in its ruins. It dwindled and dimmed, and then he went wobbling around a bend and even its glow vanished from the sides of the tunnel.

As he turned that corner, something behind him shrieked, cutting through the general roar of noise like a god in torture. He shrank down into the bottom of the boat, almost losing his hold on the spear. The awful yell must have gone on for two or three minutes, utterly overpowering every echo. Then, gradually, it began to die, at first into a sort of hopeless howl, then into a series of raw hoarse wails, and at last into a choked mixture of weeping and giggling . . . Oh! oooh! . . . Whee! . . . oh, oh, oh . . . whee! . . . which made Naysmith's every hair stand on end. It was, obviously, only one of the high-pressure gas jets fluting over a rock lip.

Obviously.

After that he was glad to be back in the darkness, however little it promised. The boat bobbed and slithered in the midst of the flood. On turns it was washed against the walls and Naysmith poled it back into the center of the current as best he could with his break-bone spear, which kept knocking him about the helmet and ribs every time he tried to use it for anything but steering. Some of those collisions were inexplicably soft; he did not try to see why, because he was saving the chest-light for baling, and in any event he was swept by them too fast to look back.

Just under him gurgled the Grand Sewer of Chandala, a torrent of filth and pestilence. He floated down it inside his suit, Naysmith, master surgeon, a bubble of precarious life in a universe of corruption, skimming the entropy gradient clinging to the edges of a tick's carapace . . . and clinging to incorruption to the last.

AGAIN, after a while, he saw light ahead, sullenly red at first, but becoming more and more orange as the boat swept on. For the first time he saw the limits of the tunnel, outlined ahead of him in the form of a broad arch. Could he possibly be approaching the surface? It did not seem possible; it was night up there—and besides, Chandalese daylight was nothing like this.

Then the tunnel mouth was behind him, and he was coasting on an enormous infernal sea.

The light was now a brilliant

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tangerine color, but he could not see where it came from; billowing clouds of mist rising from the surface of the sewage limited visibility to perhaps fifty feet. The current from the river was quickly dissipated, and the coracle began to drift sidewise; probing with the spear without much hope, he was surprised to touch bottom, and began to pole himself forward with the aid of his compass—though he had almost forgotten why it was that he had wanted to go in that direction.

The bottom was mucky, as was of course to have been expected; pulling the spear out of it was tiring work. Far overhead in the mists, he twice heard an odd fluttering sound, rather like that of a tightly wound rubber-band suddenly released, and once a measured flapping which seemed to pass quite low over his head; he saw nothing, however.

After half an hour he stopped poling to give himself five minute's rest. Again he began to drift sidewise. Insofar as he could tell, the whole of this infernal deep seemed to be eddying in a slow circle.

Then a tall, slender shadow loomed ahead of him. He drove the spear into the bottom and anchored himself, watching intently, but the shadow remained fixed. Finally he pushed the shell cautiously toward it.

It was a totem pole, obviously very old; almost all its paint was gone, and the exposed wood was grey. There were others ahead; within a few moments he was in what was almost a forest of them, their many mute faces grinning and grimacing at him or staring hopelessly off into the mists. Some of them were canted alarmingly and seemed to be on the verge of falling into the ordure, but even with these he found it hard to set aside the impression that they were watching him.

There was, he realized slowly, a reason for this absurd, frightening feeling. The totems testified to something more than the deaths of uncountable thousands of Chandalese. They were witness also to the fact that this gulf was known and visited, at least by the priest-chief caste; obviously the driving of the poles in this abyss was the final ritual act of condemnation of a city-state. He was not safe from pursuit yet.

And what, he found himself wondering despite his desperation, could it possibly be all about—this completely deliberate, systematic slaughter of whole nations of one's fellow beings by pestilence contrived and abetted? It was certainly not a form of warfare; that he might have understood. It was more like the extermination of

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the rabbits of Australia by infecting them with a plague. He remembered very dimly that the first settlers of North America had tried, unsuccessfully, to spread smallpox among the Indians for the same reason; but the memory seemed to be no help in understanding Chandala.

Again he heard that rhythmic sound, now much closer, and something large and peculiarly rubbery went by him, almost on a level with his shoulders. At his sudden movement, it rose and perched briefly on one of the totems, just too far ahead in the mist to be clearly visible.

He had not the slightest desire to get any closer to it, but the current was carrying him that way. As he approached, dragging the blade of the spear fruitlessly, the thing seemed to fall off the pole, and with a sudden flap of wings—he could just make out their spread, which seemed to be about four feet—disappeared into the murk.

He touched his gun. It did not reassure him much. It occurred to him that since this sea was visited, anything that lived here might hesitate to attack him, but he knew he could not count on that. The Chandalese might well have truces with such creatures which would not protect Naysmith for an instant. It was imperative to keep going, and if possible, to get out.

The totem poles were beginning to thin out. He could see high-water marks on the remaining ones, which meant that the underground ocean was large enough to show tides, but he had no idea what size that indicated; for one thing, he knew neither the mass nor the distance of Chandala's moon. He did remember, however, that he had seen no tide-marks as he had entered the forest of idols, which meant that it was ebbing now; and it seemed to him that the current was distinctly faster than before.

He poled forward vigorously. Several times he heard the flapping noise and the fluttering sounds again, and not these alone. There were other noises. Some of them were impossible to interpret, and some of them so suggestive that he could only pray that he was wrong about them. For a while he tried shutting the radio off, but he found the silence inside the helmet even less possible to endure, as well as cutting him off from possible cues to pursuit.

But the current continued to pick up, and shortly he noticed that he was casting a shadow into the shell before him. If the source of the light, whatever it was, was over the center of the sea, it was either relatively or he had come a long distance; perhaps both.

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Then there was a wall looming to his left side. Five more long thrusts with the spear, and there was another on his right. The light dimmed; the water ran faster.

He was back on a river again. By the time the blackness closed down the current was rushing, and once more he was forced to sit down and use the spear as a steering oar. Again ahead of him he heard the scream of gas jets.

Mixed with that sound was another noise, a prolonged roaring which at first completely baffled him. Then, suddenly, he recognized it; it was the sound of a great cataract.

Frantically he flashed his light about. There was a ledge of sorts beside the torrent, but he was going so fast now that to make a leap for it would risk smashing his helmet. All the same, he had no choice. He thrust the skidding coracle toward the wall and jumped.

He struck fair, on his feet. He secured his balance in time to see the shell swept away, with his pack and spare oxygen bottles.

For a reason he cannot now explain, this amused him.

This, as Naysmith chooses to tell it, is the end of the meaningful part of the story, though by no means the end of his travails; these he dismisses as "scenery". As his historian I can't be quite so offhand about them, but he has supplied me with few details to go by.

He found the cataract, not very far ahead; evidently he had jumped none too soon. As its sound had suggested, it was a monster, leaping over an underground cliff which he guesses must have been four or five miles high, into a cavern which might have been the Great Gulf itself. He says, and I think he is right, that we now have an explanation for the low density of Chandala: if the rest of it has as much underground area as the part he saw, its crust must be extremely porous. By this reckoning, the Chandalese underworld must have almost the surface area of Mars.

It must have seemed a world to itself indeed to Naysmith, standing on the rim of that gulf and looking down at its fire-filled floor. Where the cataract struck, steam rose in huge billows and plumes, and with a scream which forced him to shut off the radio at once. Occasionally the ground shook faintly under his feet.

Face to face with hell, Naysmith found reason to hope. This inferno, it seemed to him, might well underlie the region of hot springs, geysers and fumaroles toward which he had been heading from the beginning; and if so there should be dead volcanic

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funnels through which he might escape to the surface. This proved to be the case; but first he had to pick his way around the edge of the abyss to search for one, starting occasional rockslides, the heat blasting through his helmet, and all in the most profound and unnatural silence. If this is scenery, I prefer not to be offered any more scenic vacations.

"But on the way, I figured it out," Naysmith told me. "Rituals don't grow without a reason—especially not rituals involving a whole culture. This one has a reason that I should have been the first to see—or any physician should. You, too."

"Thanks. But I don't see it. If the Heart stars do, they aren't telling."

"They must think it's obvious," Naysmith said. "It's eugenics. Most planets select for better genes by controlling breeding. The Chandalese do it by genocide. They force their lower castes to kill themselves off."

"Ugh. Are you sure? Is it scientific? I don't see how it could be, under the circumstances."

"Well, I don't have all the data. But I think a really thorough study of Chandalese history, with a statistician to help, would show that it is. It's also an enormously dangerous method and it may wind up with the whole planet dead; that's the chance they're taking, and I assume they're aware of it."

"Well," I said, "assuming that it does work, I wouldn't admit a planet that 'survived' by that method into any federation *I* ran."

"No," Naysmith said soberly. "Neither would I. And there's the rub, you see, because the Heart stars will. That's what shook me. I may have been a lousy doctor—and don't waste your breath denying it, you know what I mean—but I've been giving at least lip-service to all our standard humanitarian assumptions all my life, without ever examining them. What the Chandalese face up to, and we don't, is that death is now and has always been *the* drive-wheel of evolution. They not only face up to it, they use it.

"When I was down there in the middle of that sewer, I was in the middle of my own *Goetzendaemmerung*—the twilight of the idols that Nietzsche speaks of. I could see all the totems of my own world, of my own life, falling into the muck . . . shooting like logs over the brink into hell. And it was then that I knew I couldn't be a surgeon any more."

"Come now," I said. "You'll get over it. After all, it's just another planet with strange customs. There are millions of them."

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"You weren't there," Naysmith said, looking over my shoulder at nothing. "For you, that's all it is. For me . . . 'No other taste shall change this.' Don't you see? All planets are Chandalas. It's not just that hell is real. The laws that run it are the laws of life everywhere."

His gaze returned to me. It made me horribly uneasy.

"What was it Mephistopheles said? 'Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.' The totems are falling all around us as we sit here. One by one, Rosenbaum; one by one."

And that is how we lost Naysmith. It would have been easy enough to say simply that he had a desperate experience on a savage planet and that it damaged his sanity, and let it go at that. But it would not be true. I would dismiss it that way myself if I could.

But I cannot bring myself to forget that the Heart stars classify Chandala as a civilized world.

THE END

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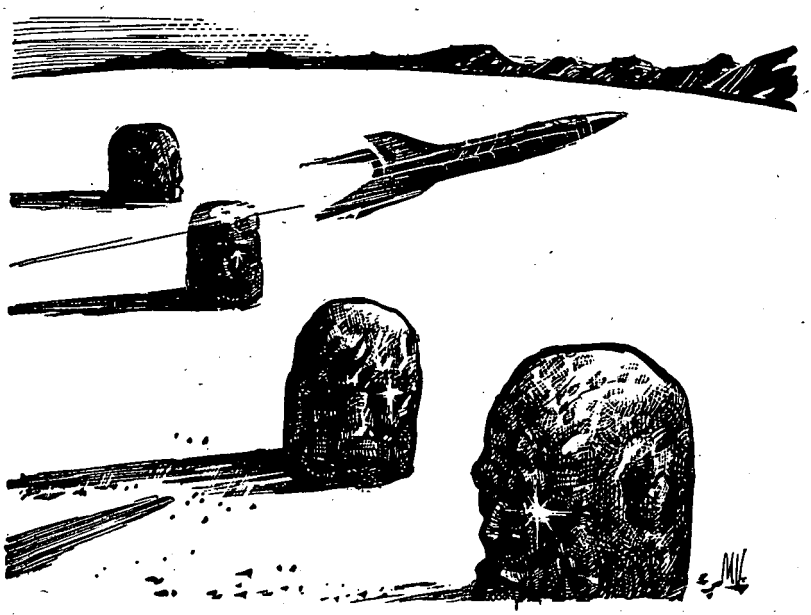

The four great heads loomed in the desert . . . offering riches, threatening doom. . . . Could they be sentient, or were they merely

THE BALD-HEADED MIRAGE

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR VARGA

THE asteroid didn't have a name, unless one wanted to count the four-letter word which Chuck had used to designate it as he set the ship down.

Barwell didn't like the word, or any of the words Chuck used. Back in the old days, before space-travel, people with Chuck's limited and unsavory vocabulary were

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often described as "earthy." Barwell wondered what they should be called today. "Planetary"? Or "asteroidy"?

It didn't matter. What mattered was that Chuck happened to be a typical space frontiersman. Some day he and his fellows would probably be transfigured in legend as heroic interplanetary pioneers, just as the early settlers of the old American west had been transfigured. Songs and sagas would be written of their fearless exploits, their bold vision, their thirst for freedom, their struggle to shake down the stars.

But men like Barwell, who had to live with them now, knew that the space frontiersmen were probably no different than their historic counterparts back on Earth. They were misfits, antisocial aberrants who fled the responsibilities of organized society and the punishment of its laws. They sought the skies not out of poetic yearning but in a desperate attempt to evade bad debts, extortion charges, murder raps, bastardy warrants—and what they hoped to find was not the beauty of nature but the booty. They were led not by light but by loot—and because most of them were uncouth, ignorant men, they teamed up with partners like George Barwell who provided the brain to balance the brawn.

Perhaps, Barwell reasoned, he was being unfair. Chuck, like most of his counterparts, had more than brawn; he had natural coordination, natural comprehension manifesting itself in mechanical aptitudes. He was, in a word, a damned good pilot—just as the stumblebums of the Old West were often damned good horsemen, stagecoach drivers, bullwhackers, hunters and scouts. What he lacked in ratiocination Barwell provided. Together they formed a team—cerebrum and cerebellum, plus a psychic *medulla oblongata* composed of a fusion of component qualities.

Only by the time they landed on the asteroid, Barwell was damned sick of Chuck's four-letter words. Chuck had a four-letter word for everything during their long cruise—to describe the food, the confinement in the tiny cabin of the ship, his need for a sexual outlet. Chuck talked about nothing else, was interested in nothing else.

Barwell's own tastes ran towards poetry; the oldstyle poetry of long ago, complete with rhyme and metre and onomotopoeia. But there was

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no sense even mentioning the subject to Chuck; give him a title like *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and he'd think it was about the narcotics supply of some regiment. And as for *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*—

No, it was easier for Barwell to keep silent and let Chuck do the talking. About the . . . mineral deposits they were going to find, and the . . . money they'd make so they could go back to that . . . Lunadome City and tell everybody to . . .

It was easier for Barwell to keep silent, but not much easier. And by the time they were approaching the surface of the asteroid he was heartily sick of his partner, and his earthy aspirations. If George Barwell had invested his small inheritance in a second-hand ship in order to conduct a private sky-scan, it wasn't because he wanted wealth to gratify his aggressive drives against society. He knew exactly what he meant to do with his money, if successful. He'd buy himself a little place out past Pluto and set up an interplanetary Walden's Pond. Here he'd settle down to write poetry in the ancient manner; not the intermediate *vers libre* of the first space age or today's soundspeak synthesis which had emerged from what the scholars once called "progressive jazz." He hoped, too, to do some erudite and expensive research with the priceless tapes of forgotten folk-songs.

But there was no time for such speculations now, no time for poesy. They were skimming across the surface of the asteroid, off autopilot, of course, while the instruments tested for grav., ox., density, radiation, temp., and all the rest. Chuck was at the controls, set for a handland any minute.

Barwell got the tape comps and studied them. "We'll do all right," he muttered. "One and one-fourth grav. is no problem. But we'll have to wear our bubbles. And—"

Chuck shook his head.

"Dead," he muttered. That was one of the bad things about a trip like this—both of them had gotten into the habit of muttering; they didn't really converse with one another, just vocalized a *monologue interieur*. "All dead. Desert and mountains. Of course, we want the mountains, but why the . . . does it have to be so dead?"

"Because it's an asteroid." Barwell moved over to within visual range of the scanners.

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"You seldom find mineral deposits on inhabitable bodies."

His mind played the usual tricks, contradicting his last statement. He thought of the mineral deposits he had seen in the form of gold and diamonds, ornamenting the women of Lunadome City; mineral deposits on *very* inhabitable bodies. And that thought led him to still another; the lying premises of most of the "space romances" he had read, or for that matter, the so-called "factual accounts" of space travel. In almost all of them the emphasis was on the so-called thrill and challenge involved in expeditionary flights. Few were honest enough to present the reality of a spaceman's outlook, which was one of constant physical frustration. When he set up his interplanetary Walden's Pond, he'd make sure to bring along some feminine companionship. *All* spaceships were really powered with sex-drive, he decided. But to satisfy the libido required money. *Libidough.*

"Look!" Chuck wasn't muttering now, he was shouting. And pointing at the starboard scanner.

Barwell gazed out and down.

They were at a half-mile elevation, over the desert, and the white sky shone pitilessly on an endless expanse of nothingness—the flat, monotonous expanse of sand or detritus was like a smooth, unrippled lake. *A lake in which giants bathed, immersed to their necks—*

Barwell saw them now; four giant bald heads in a row. He turned to Chuck. "What do you mean, dead?" he murmured. "There's life here. See for yourself."

"Stones," Chuck grunted. "Just stones."

"Look like heads to me."

"Sure they do, from this angle. Wait, I'll make another run."

The ship obeyed, dipping lower.

"Statues," Barwell decided. "Those *are* heads, you can see that now, can't you?"

". . . !" said Chuck. It wasn't a reply, merely a forceful observation. And now Barwell could see what he observed. The four heads set in sand *were* artificially carved, and in their eyesockets blazed a livid luminance.

"Emeralds," Chuck whispered. "Emeralds as big as wagon-wheels!"

"Can't be." Barwell shook his head. "There are no such concentrations of stratification—"

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"I see 'em. So do you."

"Mirage. Some kind of igneous deposit."

"Why the . . . can't you talk English, like me?" Chuck demanded. "That's no mirage. It's real. Whoever heard of a bald-headed mirage?"

He began to snort and busied himself at the controls.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Setting down for a landing, that's what."

"Now wait a minute—"

"What for? Man, those emeralds—"

"All right, hold it." Barwell's tone was subdued, but something about it caused Chuck to hesitate.

"Let's think things through for a minute," he continued. "Grant that there *are* actual stone heads down there. And that they have some kind of ornamentation for eyes."

"Emeralds, dammit!"

"That's beside the point. The point is, statues don't come into existence through spontaneous generation."

"Will you for . . . talk English?"

"Somebody has to *make* statuary. Don't you see, there must be life down there."

"So?"

"So we land a good distance away. *And* come out armed. Armed and cautious."

"All right. Anything that shows its head, I blast."

"You don't blast. Not until you know what it is, and whether or not it shows hostility."

"Blast first, talk later." Chuck repeated the code that was older than the hills. *The only good Indian is a dead Indian.* Is prejudice a survival-mechanism?

Chuck's instantaneous, automatic response to anything new or different would be to lash out at it and destroy it. Barwell's would be to examine it and intellectualize. He wondered which of them was reacting correctly, then decided it would depend upon individual circumstance. But then, one must never generalize, because everything is unique—and this in itself is a generalization.

Barwell unracked the weapons, nevertheless, as Chuck went into reverse landing position. He opened the compartment and extracted the suits and the bubbles. He tested the oxygen-cycle of the containers. He checked the food-belts. He brought out the footwear. And all the while he was drowning in the muddy stream-of-consciousness. Bubbles arose.

Columbus, buckling on his

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armor before the landing at San Salvador . . . Balboa, that voyaging *voyeur,* peeking at a peak on Darien . . . Henry M. Stanley, being presumptuous with Dr. Livingstone . . . the first footfall on the moon, and the first man to scrawl *Kilroy Was Here* and disfigure the lunar landscape with an obscene injunction . . . a faroff memory of the California hills and a whitewashed message writ on rock; *Help Stamp Out Reality* . . . what was this land worth if those *were* emerald eyes? . . . Emerald Isles . . . when Irish eyes are bloodshot, sure, 'tis like a . . . but the eyes weren't emeralds, it was a mirage . . . a bald-headed mirage . . . a mirage of convenience. *What do you think about when you're preparing to land on a strange and alien world? You think about what a wonderful thing it would be to be back in Lunadome City, settling down to a good meal of dehydrated eggs or a bad night with a dehydrated woman.* Powdered women. A new recipe. Just add water and stir. Serves two. *That's what you think about, that's all you ever think about.*

And Chuck? What was *he* thinking about?

"Better make sure you use the relief tube before you put a suit on and go out there," Chuck grunted.

That was Chuck, all right —the *practical* one.

And on this high note, the expedition proper started.

On the sweat of opening the locks. On the wrenching effort of lowering the landing-ladder. On the stumbling contact with the hard sand. On the wheezing accommodation to the oxygen-feeders. On the blinding brilliance of the garish glare, searing into the skull through eyes long-accustomed to half-darkness. On the trickle of sweat inside the suit, the tightness of the constricting crotch at every step, the heaviness of tank and weapon. *O Pioneers—*

"Oh . . . !" said Chuck. Barwell couldn't hear him, but like every spacer, he'd learned lipreading. He'd also learned to keep his own mouth shut, but now, as he turned towards the stone heads in the sand a dozen miles to their right, he broke his own self-imposed rule of silence.

"They're gone!" he gasped. And then blinked, as the echo of his own voice rebounded in reverberation from the bubble in which his head was encased.

Chuck followed his stare and nodded.

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The heads were gone.

There was no possibility of miscalculation in landing. Chuck had set down within ten or twelve miles of the sighting spot. And Barwell remembered now that he had glanced sidelong through a scanner as he'd donned his suit and bubble. The heads had been visible then.

But they were gone.

Nothing on every side but an expanse of shimmering sand. And far beyond, to the left, the mountains.

"Mirage," he whispered. "It *was* a mirage, after all."

Chuck was reading him. His own lips formed a phrase. It wasn't exactly a reply—merely an obscene reaction.

As if by common, unspoken consent, the two men turned and trudged back to the ship. They clambered up the ladder, closed the locks, wearily removed their suits.

"We were space-bugged," Chuck muttered. "The two of us." He shook his head. "But I saw 'em. So did you."

"Let's go over the course again, retrace our route." Barwell waited until he saw Chuck nod. Then he sought a position at the starboard scanner.

"Waste a lot of juice taking off," Chuck grumbled. "Damn clumsy old tub!"

"If we find what we're looking for, you can have a new one. A whole fleet," Barwell reminded him.

"Sure." Chuck tested, then busied himself. There was a shuddering lurch.

"Slowly," Barwell cautioned.

Chuck answered with a suggestion as impossible as it was indecent, but he obeyed. The ship skimmed.

"Right about here," Barwell murmured. "Wasn't it?"

"Think so."

The ship hovered and the two men peered down. Peered down at empty wasteland.

"If only Mr. Eliot were alive to see it," Barwell told himself aloud.

"Who?"

"T. S. Eliot." Barwell paused. "A minor poet."

"T. S., huh?" Chuck snorted. Then he sobered. "Well, now what do we do?"

"Keep cruising. We'll head for the mountains. That's where we intended to go, anyway."

Chuck nodded and turned away. The ship rose, picked up speed.

Barwell contemplated the dryness of the desert, then refreshed himself by plunging back into the stream-of-consciousness.

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Well, Columbus was disappointed with San Salvador, too; it wasn't really Asia. And Balboa never *really* stood upon a peak of Darien, except in the poem. Actually, he was at the Isthmus of Panama. Henry M. Stanley couldn't persuade Dr. Livingstone to return with him, and the first man to reach the moon was the first man to die there. And there were no dehydrated women, either, or hydrated ones, either. *Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink.*

The feeling of frustration came again, and Barwell thought of the one woman he had truly loved, wishing she were somehow beside him now as she had been beside him once, so long ago.

"There they are!"

Chuck's shout brought him wet and dripping tears of self-pity, from the pool of memory. Barwell stared down and out.

The heads rose from the desert below. The great eyes gleamed.

"We're setting down!" Chuck told him.

Barwell shrugged.

Once again, the interminable routine. But this time, after both men were fully accoutred, they stared through the scanner to reassure themselves the stone heads were still visible. scarcely a mile away.

The heads stared back.

Then the locks swung open, the ladder swung down, and they emerged. Emerged upon the emptiness.

"Gone!"

Both men muttered simultaneously.

Then they walked—walked warily, weapons at the ready, across the barren plain. And walked wearily back again.

In the cabin, interminably, they argued and discussed. "Gone with the wind," sighed Barwell. "Only there is no wind."

"It can't be a mirage. I saw those emeralds just as clear—" Chuck shook his head. "But if it was, why in hell did it have to be stone heads? When it comes to mirages, I'll take—"

And he proceeded to describe his preferences in mirages very graphically. It was Barwell who finally resolved the situation.

"The mountains," he said. "Let's not waste any more time."

So they went to the mountains.

That is, they went *near* the mountains, skimming in low for a drop-landing on the

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smooth sands before the foothills. They squinted through the shimmering sheen of the scene, but there were no stone heads; only the looming loftiness of the great peaks in the distance.

Leaving the ship, they set forth on foot to clamber and climb and curse. But in the end there were merely the muttered oaths. For there was nothing to climb. The mountains were merely another kind of mirage—palpable, but not solid. Mountains of detritus, mountains of dust into which the two men swiftly sank as they attempted to proceed.

"Volcanic ash," Barwell mouthed, through the bubble. "That's the answer."

Chuck had another answer, but Barwell ignored it. He knew now that their quest was quixotic. There would be no mineral deposits in the non-existent soil of this asteroid; it was merely a gigantic lava-splinter flung forth into space by the eon-old eruption of a volcano on some far-distant planet. Either that or a meteoric byproduct. The actual explanation didn't matter. What mattered was that there would be no way to wealth in this wilderness. They'd have to go back to the ship.

The two men turned, the grippers on the soles of their footwear useless in the shifting sand as they plodded down into the plain once more. Far in the distance they could see the black speck of the ship. It was hard to walk, but they kept moving as the speck became a bulk, the bulk became a recognizable object, the object became a—

Chuck must have seen it first, because he halted. Then Barwell squinted and stared. Even in the lurid luminence his eyes widened as he saw the ship; saw the crushed and crumpled hull that had been squashed and serrated—

Then they were both running across the plain, stumbling and lurching towards the wreckage. Everything seemed to function in slow motion, as in a nightmare, but the nightmare continued. It continued as they peered up at the incredibly battered silver shell; proceeded as they swung up the ladder and found the entry squeezed shut.

They stood below, on the surface of the sand, and there was no need to mouth a word from behind the bubbles. Both of them knew the situation. Food and water for

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a day, if they dared remove the bubbles long enough to ingest a supply. Oxygen for perhaps another twelve hours at most. And then—

There was no point in considering what had happened, or why, or how. All that seemed important now was the *fait accompli.*

"Fate *accompli,*" Barwell told himself. And that's all he could tell himself, or trust himself to tell. Staring up at the shattered sides of the spaceship, he experienced a sensation surpassing horror. For this phenomenon was alien.

Alien. A much-used, misused word, which cannot express the inexpressible. *Alien*—foreign. Foreign to understanding, foreign to human comprehension. Barwell recalled Arthur Machen's definition of true evil—when the roses sing.

When the roses sing.

Perhaps *alien* isn't always synonymous with *evil*—but something had destroyed the ship. There was no wind, and no life; yet they had walked away for a few miles and returned, and the ship was crumpled.

The roses were singing. What is a rose? Barwell thought of a long-dead poetess, Gertrude Stein. *A rose is a rose is a rose.* And added, *is evil.* But do roses live, does evil live, does the impalpable truly exist? *A rose by any other name—*

"Dammit, what happened?" Chuck, and the voice of reality. He wasn't concerned with roses, or neuroses, either. He wanted to name the enemy, locate it, and strike back. And with the realization Barwell (like a rose) wilted.

Here was a situation which didn't call for theory, or for any form of abstruse speculation. The ship was gone. They were stranded, with food and oxygen in short supply. A clear call for Chuck and his pioneer blood—or would his pioneer blood, too, be spilled across the sand?

Barwell hesitated helplessly, waiting for his partner to make the first move. No sceptre changed hands, but both sensed it was a moment of abdication. *The king is dead, long live the king. For another twenty-four hours, anyway.*

Both of them knew better than to waste breath in trying to talk through their bubbles. When Chuck turned back towards the mirage-mountains, Barwell followed without even moving his lips in token assent. At least there would

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be shadow there, and shelter, and surcease. The desert held nothing for either of them. The desert was all utter emptiness and shimmering mirage. Once more, Barwell thought of a lake.

Lake. As he trudged along behind Chuck's steadily-striding figure, he wondered what would happen if—as in the olden space-romances, the aliens actually invaded Earth. They'd probably send out scouting parties first; perhaps one or two at a time, in small ships. Granted the premise that their sensory organs roughly corresponded to the human and afforded similar impressions, what might they surmise from a skimming expedition over the earth at a height of a few hundred miles?

The first thing they would note was that the Earth's surface is more than three-quarters water and less than one-quarter land. So the logical conclusion; if there is any life on this planet, the chances are better than three to one that it is *marine* life—or at the very best, amphibious. The denizens of the great seas must be the highest and most intelligent life-forms. Conquer the fishes and rule the world. A highly sensible notion, that.

But there are times when high sense does not prevail. And if aliens could not be expected to comprehend humanity's existence offhand, then how could humanity interpret alienity?

In short—was there life on this asteroid which Barwell could not detect?

While there's life, there's hope. But Barwell had no hope. He had merely a premise. Something had crushed the spaceship. Where did it come from, where did it go? How did it link with life as he knew it, how did it differ? And the desert—*was* it a desert? The mountains had not been mountains. And the mirage had been—

Chuck still wasn't wasting words, even obscene ones. He merely turned and gripped his partners' arm with a plasticene-and-metal glove. Gripped it tightly, and turned, and pointed with his free hand. Pointed straight ahead, at the heads in the sand. Yes, they were here.

Barwell could have sworn that the heads hadn't been there a moment ago. But there they were, silhouetted against the searing surface, a scant mile before them. Even at this range the emerald eyes gleamed and glared, gleamed

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and glared as no mirage was meant to.

Four huge stone heads with emerald eyes. Visible to them both; visible to them *now*.

Chuck's lips formed a sentence beneath the bubble. "Keep looking at them," he said.

Barwell nodded. The two men moved forward, slowly.

Their gaze was intent, focussed upon the lambent, livid flame of the monstrous emeralds. Barwell knew, or thought he knew, what Chuck was seeing. Riches, infinite riches.

But he saw something else.

He saw all the idols of all the legends; the idols with the jewelled eyes, who stirred and moved and walked amongst men to spread destruction with a curse. He saw the massive monoliths of Stonehenge and the great figures of Easter Island and the stone horror beneath the waves in sunken R'lyeh. And the waves reminded him again of the lake, and the lake of the aliens who might misconceive and misconstrue the life-forms of Earth, and this in turn caused a curious concept. There had once been a man named Ouspensky who had speculated upon the possibility of *varieties* of time and different *rates* of duration. Perhaps the rocks also live, but at infinitely slow pace by comparison to flesh, so that flesh is unaware of the sentience of stone.

What form might life take, if forged in fire, if birthed precipitately from a volcano's flaming womb? Those great stone heads with the emerald eyes—

And all the while they were coming closer, approaching slowly. The stone heads stared and did not disappear. The emeralds blazed and burned, and now Barwell could no longer think; he could only stare and he tried the old trick again. The cool stream-of-consciousness was waiting. Little eddies of thought swirled.

Emerald eyes. His love had emerald eyes; sometimes turquoise, sometimes smoky jade, but his love was not stone. And she was worlds away and he was here, alone on the desert. But that's not where he wanted to be—plunge back now into the stream, use the fanciful thoughts to ward off the still more fanciful reality. Think of anything but emeralds, think of longforgotten stars of a longforgotten art-form, the motion pictures; think of Pearl White and Ruby Keeler

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and Jewel Carmen and of anything but emeralds, think of Diamond Jim Brady and the fabulous stones of history which men wrested from the Earth for love of woman. *Love is just around the Kohinoor.* Faith, the Hope Diamond, and Charity . . .

Emerald eyes . . . Esmeralda, and the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* . . . Hugo's title was *Notre Dame de Paris* . . . the vast cathedral with its stone gargoyles staring . . . but stones do not stare . . . or do they? *The emeralds were staring.*

Barwell blinked, shaking his head. He half-turned, noting that Chuck had broken into a run as he neared the four fantastic monuments in the sand. Wheezing and panting, he followed. Chuck didn't see what *he* saw—that was obvious. Even at the point of death, he wanted the emeralds. Even at the point of death—

Somehow Barwell managed to overtake his companion. He clawed at his arms, halted him. Chuck stared at him as he shook his head and mouthed the words.

"Don't go any closer!"

"Why not?"

"Because they're *alive!*"

"Nonsense." That was not the word Chuck used, but Barwell divined its meaning.

"They *are* alive. Don't you see? Living rock. With their immense weight, the desert is like water, like a lake in which they can immerse at will. Immerse and reappear, up to their necks. That's why they disappeared, because they were swimming beneath the surface—"

Barwell knew he was wasting precious oxygen, but he had to make Chuck understand.

"They must have grabbed our ship, picked it up to examine it, then discarded it."

Chuck scowled and said another word which meant, "Nonsense." He pulled free.

"No—don't—keep away—"

But Chuck had the pioneer spirit. The grab-claw-lunge-loot-rape reflex. He could only see the emeralds; the eyes that were bigger than his stomach.

And he started to run the last five hundred yards, moving across the sand towards the four staring heads which waited, *watched* and waited.

Barwell sprinted after him—or tried to sprint. But he could only flounder forward, noting as he did so that the huge rock heads were pitted and eroded, but not *chiselled.* No man, and no conceivable

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alien, had sculpted these semblances. For they were not semblances but actualities. The rock *lived,* the stone *sensed.*

And the emerald eyes beckoned . . .

"Come back!" It was worse than useless to shout, for Chuck couldn't see his face behind the bubble. He could only see the great faces before him, and the emeralds above. His own eyes were blinded by hunger, by a greed greater than need.

Panting, Barwell caught up with the running man, whirled him around.

"Keep back," he mouthed. "Don't get any closer—they'll crush you like they crushed the ship—"

"You lie!" Chuck turned, his weapon suddenly poised. "Maybe that was a mirage, too. But the jewels are real. I know your idea, you . . . ! Get rid of me, take the emeralds for yourself, repair the ship and take off. Only I'm way ahead of you, because that's *my* idea, too!"

"No—" gasped Barwell, realizing at the same moment that some poet had once said, "Say *Yes* to life!" and simultaneously aware that now there would be no time for further affirmation.

Because the weapon blazed, and then Barwell was falling; falling into the stream-of-consciousness and beyond, into the bubbling blackness of the stream-of-unconsciousness where there were no stone heads or emerald eyes. Where there was, no longer, any Barwell . . .

So it remained for Chuck to stand over the body of his partner at the base of the great stone head; to stand and grin in triumph as the smoke curled up as if before the altar of a god.

And like a giant god, the stone accepted its sacrifice. Incredulous, Chuck watched the incredible—saw the rock split open, saw the mountainous maw loom large as the head dipped and *gulped.*

Then the sand was smooth again. Barwell's body was gone.

Realization came brutally, belatedly. Chuck turned to run, knowing the heads *were* alive. And as he ran a vision came to him of these cyclopean creatures burrowing through the sand, bathing beneath the surface of the plain—rising at will to survey the silence of their dread domain. He could see a great stone paw emerge to fumble with the ship; knew now what the serrations in its sides meant.

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They were simply the marks of gigantic *teeth*. Teeth in a mouth that tasted, rejected; a hand had tossed the ship aside like a crumpled toy floating on the lake of sand.

For one moment Chuck thought as Barwell thought, and then the thought was transfigured by reality. A gigantic paw *did* emerge from the sand before him as he ran. It scooped Chuck up and tossed him down into the grinding stone mouth.

There was the sound stone makes when it gulps, and then silence.

The four heads turned to stare once more—stare at nothingness. They would gaze silently for a long, long time through ageless emerald eyes, for what is eternity to a stone.

Sooner or later, in another thousand years—or a million, what did it matter?—another ship would come.

THE END

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In the quarry pond, she was beauty. In the harsh light of day, she was ugly. But truth remained—and truth is beauty. The boy grew up in the short days that he knew his

FIRST LOVE

By LLOYD BIGGLE

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

WALTER ROGERS laid aside his brush, pushed back the easel, switched off the dim light. The storm had faltered momentarily, and now it surged back with a pounding torrent of rain. Walt stepped to the open window and stood there, oblivious of the water that flooded against his eager young face.

Flashes of lightning ripped aside the darkness and laid bare a familiar landscape twisted strangely. Towering trees bowed submissively before the angrily moaning wind. Water veiled the accumulated filth of the barn yard, and cattle huddled pathetically under a shelter. The rain blurred the outlines of the barn, and gave it a somber loveliness.

Lightning flashed again, and thunder snapped and rumbled after it, and Walt leaned forward with his elbows on the window sill, and whispered, "Beautiful. Beautiful."

But how to paint it? Oh, he could paint how it looked. Any darn fool could paint *that*. But how to paint the sound of it, and the feel of it, and the wonderful, glorious, fresh-breathing smell of it?

He turned away and kicked disgustedly at the easel, and at that moment the thunder struck. It came with a thickening roar that impaled him in clinging fright against the window sill. As he stood crouched in numbed amazement it swelled to a bloated, consuming agony of sound until he winced in pain and clapped his hands to his ears, and still it grew and crescendoed until, at the instant it seemed no longer bearable, it exploded.

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He was lying on the floor under the window, in the full blast of the driving rain. Glass tinkled as he moved, and cascaded from his back as he got to his feet. His first thought was to close the window, and he cut his hand on a sliver of glass that remained attached to the empty frame. His ears rang painfully, and the wild roar of the storm now seemed only a subdued mutter. As he stared into the night, fire glowed in the distance, sent an exploring tongue of flame up into the rain, and suddenly leaped skyward.

He ran from his room, and down the hallway. As he reached his parents' room his father opened the door, flashlight in hand.

"Did your window break?" his father said. "Ours did." He flashed the light into a spare bedroom. "That one's broken, too. And the lights are out."

"Dad," Walt said breathlessly, "something happened over by the quarry. There's a big fire. The flames are shooting way up."

"Damn the flames. What happens at the quarry is Zengler's business, not ours." He was looking into the bathroom. "Every window in the house is broken. In this storm, too. We'll be flooded out. Mother, get some oil cloth, or anything you can dig up. Get a hammer and some tacks, Walt. We'll have to work fast."

"Maybe we should telephone. About the fire, I mean."

"I've tried the telephone," Walt's mother called from the bedroom. "It's out-of-order."

Walt turned obediently to go for the hammer and tacks, and was brought to a halt by his father's sharp exclamation. "Walt, your back is cut. It's covered with cuts. What were you doing? Standing by the window?"

"I—yes—"

"What on earth for?"

"I was watching the storm."

"Good Lord! At three in the morning—fix him up, mother. I better get started on those windows."

There was no more sleep for the three of them that night, as they covered windows, and swept up glass, and mopped. Walt slipped away only once to open a door a crack and peer out into the night. "The quarry—" he began.

"Damn the quarry!" his father said.

"It's still burning."

The storm had passed and dawn was a pink blush on the horizon when they finished their cleaning. Walt went out with his father, and they walked across the yard with the water-soaked grass squishing under foot and stood looking towards the quarry.

"Whatever it was," Jim Rogers said, "it's burned out. I'll go take a look. Maybe Zengler had some gasoline stored over there—though I wouldn't know why. But if he's responsible for this, he's going to pay

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for these windows, or he'll never get another lease."

But it seemed that Zengler was not responsible. The fire had burned out a corner of the north pasture, where Zengler certainly had no equipment stored. The quarry, and Zengler's property, were undamaged. Neighboring farmers had heard the explosion, without any worse results than having their sleep disturbed. No one but the Rogers family had seen the fire.

The net result was a brief item in that week's edition of the Harwell Gazette, under *Local Briefs*. "A mysterious explosion, which might have been a clap of thunder, broke windows at the James Rogers farm during the storm last Monday night."

The Saturday after the storm Walt helped his father with the morning chores, as usual, and took the cows to the pasture. As they lurched away he cut diagonally across the pasture towards the quarry. The morning was warm, even for early June. White wisps of cloud drifted serenely across the purest of blue skies.

"Beautiful," Walt whispered, and wished he had brought his paints.

The mysterious fire had scarred a circle perhaps a hundred yards in diameter. At the point nearest the quarry it had ruined the fence, and Walt had come out with his father on Tuesday after school to string new strands of barbed wire. But the haste had been unnecessary. The cows, for strange cow reasons of their own making, refused to go anywhere near the place.

Walt climbed through the fence, and walked over to the quarry. Water filled a hollow that had been gouged out sometime in the past—long before Walt's time. The little lake was fifty feet deep, it was said, at its deepest point. Beyond it, the hill was sliced neatly away where Zengler's men were blasting out the rock.

Walt sat down by the water and amused himself with the reflections, imagining how he would put them on canvas. The clouds overhead, the one towering oak tree, the mass of the hill beyond—the dark, still water mirrored them splendidly. His own image had an amusing, elongated perspective.

He seized at an inspiration. "I'll come this afternoon," he thought, "and do a self-portrait, using the water instead of a mirror. I wonder if it's ever been done."

He felt gloriously happy. School had ended the day before, and he had the entire summer before him. There would be the farm work, of course, but he should find plenty of time to paint, and paint, and . . .

He looked longingly at the water. The morning was warm, but it was too early in the year for swimming. The water was probably icy. His mother would be waiting breakfast for him.

He was out of his clothes in

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an instant, carelessly dropping them on the rocky bank, and he turned and stepped off into ten feet of water. The icy shock spurred him to a frantic churning of arms and legs. He broke water, wiped his eyes, and turned to strike out for the opposite side.

Suddenly he whirled, and threshed wildly for the bank. He pulled himself out, and turned to stare at the water. He could see nothing but his own reflection, peering back at him quizzically.

But he had seen something, long and dark, drifting up out of the deep water and nosing purposely towards him. A fish? But there had never been any fish in that water, and a fish of that size would be a venerable monster.

Then he saw it again, a long, sinister-looking shadow that drifted slowly towards the bank and then hung motionless, too deep for him to see it clearly. He waited breathlessly. It tilted slowly, approached the surface, and he found himself gazing into the face of a girl.

He sucked in his breath sharply, and it was seconds before he realized that she was also staring at him and that he was nude. Moving slowly, he got to his knees and stretched out on a flat rock, moving his face close to the water.

She remained well below the surface, but by watching her intently he began to make out her features. Her dark mass of hair swayed gently in the water, stretching back the length of her body. A smooth material, greenish even in the dark water, covered her body, molding the contours of her small breasts so distinctly that he felt himself blushing. The water gave her face a curiously flattened appearance, but he measured its perfect oval with an artist's eye, and wondered what mysterious color her eyes might have.

Then he noticed the gills.

One of her hands, with delicately webbed fingers, made a circle, pointed to her open mouth, circled and pointed again. The third time he understood. She was hungry.

Even as he watched, his alert sixteen-year-old mind was attacking the imponderable with relentless logic. She was hungry. Of course she was hungry. The storm had been Monday night, whatever it was that had brought her had crashed and burned Monday night, and this was Saturday. She must be starved. There was nothing in that water for her to eat.

He had read of flying saucers and possible life on other worlds, and he did not pause to speculate. He *knew*. She could not be of this world, so she must have come from another world. How had she come? The charred edge of the pasture was a mere two hundred yards from the water. Could her people, water people, have mastered the mystery of space flight? She was here. That was answer enough. She was

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here, and her ship had consumed itself in that mysterious fire that had tossed flames high but seemed to have produced relatively little heat.

He extended one hand slowly, towards her face. She darted backwards in alarm, approached again as he withdrew his hand, and repeated her signal. Her hand moved towards her mouth. She was hungry.

Walt leaped to his feet and pulled on his clothing. With one last glance at the face in the water, he started back across the pasture—running.

Edna Rogers took in her son's disheveled appearance and wet mop of curly hair, and exclaimed, "What *have* you been doing?"

"Dad," Walt said breathessly, "I'd like to go fishing. Could I take the car?"

"By yourself?"

"Why—yes."

"Well," Jim Rogers said easily, "I guess summer's officially here, now. Things are pretty well in hand, and a mess of fish would taste good. Where are you going?"

"I know some good places," Walt said evasively.

Fishing had never interested him much. Nothing had interested him, except painting and drawing. But there was a submerged tree stump over on the river south of town, where he had once luckily caught a few sunfish. It was as good a place as any to start.

The girl was hungry. But what would she eat? Raw meat, or fresh? What about vegetables? Or fruit? She lived in the water, so he would get her some fish, if he could. And then he could try some other things.

He left the car parked by the road, and cut across the Malloy farm to reach the river. No one was about, which pleased him. Tense with excitement, he baited his hook and dropped it into the water. Now . . . if the fish would cooperate . . .

They did not. The bobber drifted idly with the current, snagged Walt's hook on the stump. He freed it and tried again, and impatiently counted the minutes. Nothing happened. He watched uneasily, and told himself that he should have taken her something else. His mother wouldn't miss one steak from the deep freezer. And he'd have to do something, quickly or she might starve.

He whipped the line out of the water and ran back to his car. Two miles down the road he pulled in at Marshall's Service Station. Old Ed Marshall sat by the door of the weathered frame building, tilted back in a chair, reading and enjoying the sunshine.

"Minnow?" he said. "I can let you have some. But if you'd rather get your own, you know where the net is. Take it any time you want it. Quite all right. And say—Sadie'd like another of those pictures of yours. She wants to put it in the guest room."

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"She'll get one," Walt said fervently.

He found the neatly-folded net in the shed behind the station. He started back to the car, and Old Ed called, "Sure you can manage it by yourself?"

"I can manage it," Walt said.

The net was twenty-five feet long, and a rather large-meshed affair for capturing minnows. There were those who thought maybe Ed used it on larger prey, and Walt, who had seen him in action one morning, was certain of it. And then—everyone knew about the way the Marshall family lived on fish in the summer.

"I'll tell you, Walt," Old Ed said in a confidential tone. "It's a little late in the morning to start out with that thing. And you have to know where to go. If you want fish, why don't you come with me tomorrow?"

"I'll give it a try," Walt said.

"I could let you have a few, for today."

"And—tomorrow?"

"I go every morning. You're welcome to come along."

"Thanks," Walt said.

Minutes later he was driving wildly towards the quarry, with three healthy-sized bass splashing in a bucket.

Fortunately Zengler's men did not work on Saturday. The quarry was deserted, the water dark and lifeless. Walt leaned over and splashed with his hand, splashed frantically. The he saw her, gliding swiftly towards him. She halted well below the surface.

He held a fish low over the water. She did not move. He lowered it into the water, and she backed slowly away. Suddenly the fish jerked, splashed, and slipped from his clutching fingers. He gasped in dismay as it darted away.

But in a flash the girl was after it. With dazzling speed she overtook it, captured it deftly, and with a graceful twist in the water headed downwards and disappeared. It all happened in an instant, a blur of movement in the water directly below him, and then he saw only her long, shapely legs receding quickly away from him.

He waited for a time, and then, when she did not reappear, he released the other fish. It would be humiliating for her, he thought, to be summoned for her food like a trained animal. And if the fish were there, he had no doubt that she could catch them.

As the fish swam away, he saw her watching him. He stretched out on the bank, his face close to the water, and looked at her.

"Beautiful," he murmured.

Certainly there was a strange loveliness in that water-shrouded face, in the blurred gracefulness of her slender figure, in the long, flowing hair. The hair fascinated him. Most of the girls of his acquaintance were wearing their hair in disturbingly short, boyish styles. He found girls to be

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formidable enough when they looked like girls.

He wondered how he might appear to her, as she looked up through the water at him. Did he possess an alien ugliness that fascinated her? Suddenly the question became very important. He told himself bitterly that he was only her provider, her meal ticket, and she could not possibly have any more interest in him beyond that. But he lingered long, that morning, and he was back again after the evening chores, lying on the bank as the sun vanished and the shadow of the old, scraggly oak tree lay quietly across the water. He stayed on until the dusk deepened, and her face was no longer visible.

He had read the poem in a school book of his mother's when he once went through it looking for subjects to draw. It suggested rich colors and strange scenes to him, but he had not understood it. Now he found it again.

"Come live with me, and be my love,
And we will some new pleasures prove,
Of golden sands, and crystal brooks,
With silken lines, and silver hooks.

"There will the river whispering run
Warm'd by thy eyes, more than the Sun.
And there th' enamour'd fish will stay,
Begging themselves they may betray.

"When thou wilt swim in that live bath,
Each fish, which every channel hath,
Will amourously to thee swim,
Gladder to catch thee, than thou him . . .

He dreamed that night of a sheltered mountain stream, pure, crystal-clear, deep, where young lovers could splash and play and love in the tumbling torrent. He awoke in a chill of fright. What would become of her? He could care for her during the summer. With Old Ed's help he could get plenty of fish. But winter would come, and there would be ice on the water, and even if she would accept other food it would be difficult to get it to her. It might be impossible.

And she might die a lonely death in the cold, stagnating water of the quarry.

The river? He rejected the thought instantly. He knew instinctively that she needed deep water, that she would be helpless and at the mercy of any passerby in the shoals of that small stream. It was thirty miles to the nearest lake, which was small. But in the opposite direction fifty miles would take him to Lake Michigan. That was where she should be, with the vast, connecting waters of the Great

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Lakes to conceal and protect her solitary life on this strange planet. But how could he get her there?

He would have to think of something.

He was out before dawn with Old Ed and his net, and they brought in fish by the milk-can full. Walt swore him to eternal secrecy, and confided that he wanted to try to stock the quarry. Old Ed allowed that he didn't think it would work, that the fish would lack their natural food and the water might be queer for them. But then—there might be some way to feed them, and if Walt wanted to try, why, he enjoyed catching fish, and he'd never rightly caught all he wanted to catch because he hated to waste them. Walt saved out enough fish for the Rogers' table and triumphantly dumped the rest into the quarry with the shadowy face watching silently from the depths.

Walt took advantage of a lull in the dinner-table conversation to say cautiously, "Mother, I'd like one of those aqualung outfits."

Edna Rogers set down the steaming dish of mashed potatoes, and stared at him. "Did you ever! What on earth would you do with it?"

"Go in the water," Walt said.

Jim Rogers seemed interested. "Now where around here is there water for a thing like that?"

"There's the river," Walt said evasively, "and the quarry . . ."

"You can't swim long under water in the river without your tail fins sticking out. And the quarry's deep enough, but there's nothing there to see, and if there was you probably couldn't see it in that water. Those lungs things are for places where there's lots of water and lots of fish and things to see."

"Mr. Moore has some of that equipment in," Edna Rogers said, giving Walt a worried look. "It wasn't very expensive."

"Just some of these goggles, and the things you put on your feet. And I told him he'd never sell them. What Walt meant was these outfits where you have a tank of air on your back, and you can go down and stay for hours. No sense in it around here. But if you want the goggles, Walt, go ahead and buy them. You've got your own money, and if you want to waste it . . ."

"Thanks, dad."

"Take some more potatoes, Walter," Edna Rogers said. "You're burning up a lot of energy these days. All this fishing and swimming . . ."

"Does him good," Jim Rogers said.

Walt's mother shook her head. "What about your painting, Walter? You haven't touched it for a week."

Walt said patiently, "There'll be plenty of time for painting when I can't go fishing."

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"He spends too much time by himself," Edna Rogers said. "Walt, Virginia Harlow asks about you every time I see her, and she felt awfully bad because you wouldn't go to her party when she asked you. She'd teach you how to dance, if you'd let her. Then you could go to the Saturday dances."

Jim Rogers chuckled dryly. "He's young. He'll have plenty of time to chase after girls."

"I still think he spends too much time by himself," Edna Rogers said. She shrugged resignedly, and changed the subject. "What did Mr. Zengler want?"

Jim Rogers laughed, and laid down his fork. "His boy thinks he saw some fish over at the quarry. He tried to catch them, and didn't get a nibble, so he wants to dynamite and see what will come up. Zengler wanted to know if I had any objections to doing it."

"Dynamite?" Walt blurted. "Dynamite—the quarry?"

"Yeah. I told Zengler there'd never been any fish there and couldn't be any, and if he wanted to waste the dynamite that was all right with me."

"Did you ever!" Edna Rogers said. "Is he going to do it?"

"I don't think so. Zengler's not one to waste anything. What's the matter, Walt?"

"I've finished," Walt said, getting to his feet. "I'm not very hungry."

"You might excuse yourself."

"Excuse me, please," Walt said humbly, and fled before they could answer.

The quarry was a blending of shadows. The water was motionless, solid-looking in the gathering darkness. Walt circled around it, and moved on around the edge of the hill to the shack that served Zengler as office and storehouse. Zengler's four trucks were parked haphazardly nearby, three of them battered hulks and the fourth new, its sleek lines shining in the wispy moonlight.

Walt sat down in the shadow of the shack, and waited.

He knew Roy Zengler. The kid was a young punk who did what he pleased, and if his father told him not to do something he'd be sneaking around the first chance he got to do it. And old man Zengler would think it was a joke, afterwards, and laugh it off.

Crickets chirped busily, and a rabbit loped slowly past, hesitated, and scampered away. The ground became insufferably hard, and Walt got to his feet and leaned against the shack. Supposing Roy didn't come? Then Walt could see him in the morning, but he knew if he warned the kid off, he'd be that much more certain to try it.

A light bounced towards him on the quarry road. A bicycle lurched and skidded in the sand, and its rider leaped off and wheeled it forward. He leaned it against the shed and moved towards the door, keys jingling.

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Walt stepped out of the shadow and faced him.

"Roy?"

"Oh, it's you, Walt. Jeeze, you scared me. Gonna have a little fun—want to join me?"

"Those fish are mine," Walt said. "I put them there. You let them alone."

"Like hell they're yours. Dad leases this place, doesn't he? You've got no business . . ."

Walt swung. His fist spattered against Roy's face, and sent him sprawling. Walt was on him in a flash, his hands found the throat and circled it, and he applied pressure. "Try dynamiting those fish," Walt said, "and I'll kill you."

"All right," Roy said weakly.

Walt released him, and Roy got up slowly. "All right," he said again. "I didn't know. Your old man said—you could have been nice about it. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You let them alone."

"All right."

Roy went to his bicycle, wheeled it out to the road, and mounted. "You can't watch this place all the time," he shouted. "I'll be back. You'll see."

Walt fumbled frantically on the ground, found a stone, and threw it.

"Missed!" Roy shouted. "And I'll be back."

He vanished into the darkness, and Walt stood looking after him, white-faced and trembling with rage and fright, knowing he would be back.

"Your mother and I would like to go over to Coleville tomorrow," Jim Rogers said. "She wants to see her sister, and maybe we'll take in a movie. Think you could manage the evening chores all right?"

Walt, lost in thought, said nothing.

"Walt? Did you hear what I said?"

"What? Oh, sure. I can manage. I always have, haven't I?"

Jim Rogers chuckled. "Sure you have. I was just wondering if you were still with us."

"Will you stay overnight?"

"Nope. We won't be back very early, though. Don't wait up for us."

Walt nodded absently, looked up, found his father regarding him with a troubled frown.

"Something bothering you, Walt?"

"No. Why?"

"You've been acting odd. Your mother's worried about you. So—when you went out last night, I followed you. Don't look so guilty," he went on, as Walt started and flushed crimson. "She was afraid you were getting into trouble, the way you've been staying out nights. I reckon maybe she was more afraid you were getting some girl into trouble. Anyway, I don't see much point in sitting over there by the quarry until after midnight, but if you want to do it I can't, see that harm can come of it. I know you've always enjoyed kind of going off by yourself. It isn't our way, your

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mother and I, but we try to understand. So I want you to know we're on your side, and if you have something on your mind we'll try to help."

Walt moistened his lips, and swallowed. "Thanks, dad."

"You're sure there isn't something bothering you?"

"No. Nothing."

"Well—you weren't over there to meet someone, were you? A girl, maybe?"

"No," Walt said defiantly.

"If you have a girl, or when you have one, you don't have to sneak off and meet her. Bring her here, and we'll make her welcome. Otherwise, well, you're young. There are a lot of problems in this life, and you'll run smack into them when you get older. There's no point in rushing around trying to tangle with them now. Might as well enjoy yourself. And—are you sure it's all right about the chores?"

"It'll be all right."

Later, when his parents were safely out of hearing, Walt risked a telephone call. Carl Reynolds, a friend Walt's age, accepted his request as a matter of course. "Sure," he said. "Sure—I'll do chores for you Saturday night. I owe you one, you know. Wait. I'll clear it with the old man."

"Carl," Walt said tremulously, "tell him you're going to help me. Don't tell him I won't be here."

There was a moment of silence, and then Carl laughed. "Sure—I'll tell him that. And I'll wish you luck, old man. Do I know her?"

"No," Walt said. "You don't know her."

Late Saturday afternoon. Walt walked slowly over to the deserted quarry. Somewhere in the depths of water *she* was—doing what? He knew that he had only to splash, and she would come. But instead he sat down under the oak tree, and thoughtfully studied the quiet, dark water. He had come to realize that his was a hopeless love, that there was no middle ground where a creature of the air and one of the water could meet. He had gone swimming in the quarry twice since he had found her. The first time she had fled in seeming panic, and when she did return she kept her distance cautiously.

He wanted only to touch her, to caress the beautiful, flowing hair. She eluded him easily, and then, when she found how awkward his movements were, she circled around him with dazzling speed. He dove to the depths with her, but in the uncertain light it was only a nimble shadow that cavorted about him. His second effort had been as frustrating as the first, and he had not tried again.

True love, he told himself, must be selfless. The happiness of the loved one was the important thing. He had spent hours trying to think of some place, some way for her to live in comfort and safety, where he could

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still visit her from time to time, even if only to see her through the blurring water. But there was no such place. He would have to get her to Lake Michigan and once those vast waters closed over her he must accept the fact that he could never see her again.

He glanced at his watch, and walked towards Zengler's shack. "Has to be timed just right," he reminded himself. A single blow with a rock snapped open the flimsy padlock. There weren't —never had been—any thieves around Harwell, and that lock had served Zengler for years.

Walt lifted the rings of keys from a nail inside the door, and ran an appreciative eye over Zengler's new truck. Gas? He could syphon some out of the other trucks if there wasn't enough. Anything else? A bucket. He found two in the corner, and set them aside. And . . .

Looking up at the truck's high tailgate, he started apprehensively. How would she get in?

In the shack were tools and nails. Scattered around were lengths and scraps of lumber. Walt nailed frantically, fearful that now he might be late. He should have thought of it. He could have made something easier for her than this rough ramp with strips nailed across it. But it would have to do. He carried the ramp, and the buckets, down to the water, to the spot he had picked out, and then he ran back to the truck.

He drove slowly, at first, getting the feel of the truck, timidly testing its deep-throated power. Dusk was settling on the town when he reached Harwell. Nearly everyone would be uptown, but he took no chances. He followed a circuitous route towards the business section, using alleys as much as he could, driving without lights, crossing side streets cautiously.

He kept glancing at his watch. Mr. Warren always closed up promptly at eight, Saturday night or no Saturday night. He couldn't be late, but he didn't dare be too early.

He turned into the alley paralleling Main Street, and carefully backed into position. "A. J. Warren and Sons," the weathered sign over the rear door said. "Farm Implements." Walt glanced at his watch again, went to the door, and looked in. There were several farmers up front, casually inspecting a new tractor. One of the Warren boys was sweeping up. Walt dropped back into the shadows and waited nervously.

The farmers left, one by one. Not until Mr. Warren followed the last one to the door, and locked it, did Walt step forward. Mr Warren turned, and saw him.

"Evening, Walt," he said. "Just closing. Can I do something for you?"

Walt fought to make his voice sound normal. "Dad's decided to take that big stock tank you were talking to him about."

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Mr. Warren beamed. "Glad to hear it. What changed his mind?"

"Ours sprung another leak."

"I told him it wouldn't last long. I'll send the new one out Monday morning. That be all right?"

"I'll take it now, if you don't mind," Walt said. "I borrowed a truck. It's out back."

"Why, sure. Tank's out in the shed."

"I know," Walt said. "And—Mr. Warren—"

"Yes?"

"Dad will be in Monday to see you about—about—"

"Sure thing, Walt. Your Pa's credit is good as gold. Come on, and we'll get it in the truck."

It was easy—so easy that Walt giggled hilariously when he got the truck out of Harwell and pointed towards the quarry. Then he soberly reminded himself that this was only the beginning, and he stopped laughing.

At the quarry he stopped by the water, set his brakes, and got Zengler's pump going. The ancient gasoline engine made a racket that he fancied could be heard for miles, and he felt panicky as he directed the stream of water into the tank. Across the fields he could see the lights in the barn, where Carl Reynolds would be finishing the milking. It was taking him longer than Walt had expected. Supposing he heard the pump, when he took the cows to the pasture, and came to investigate?

It couldn't be helped. It would take forever to fill the tank by hand.

When the tank was brimfull, he cut off the motor and slowly backed the truck around to the place where he had left the ramp and the buckets. It took him some jockeying to get the truck into position, so that the ramp just reached the edge of the water, and he had to be careful about it. A false move, and Zengler might never find out what had happened to his truck.

He set the brakes. He dropped the tailgate and wedged the ramp into position. Then he leaned over and splashed the water.

She did not come.

"The pump must have frightened her," he muttered.

He splashed again, and again.

Suddenly he saw her, near the surface, a dark shadow in the darker water. He waited for her to edge closer, and then he mounted the ramp. Looking down at the water, alarm gripped him. How could he make her understand what he wanted? He could scarcely see her, and he doubted that she could see him better. And would she trust him if she did understand?

He gestured. He moved up and down the ramp. He splashed the water in the tank. And all the while her shadowy form hung motionless in the water below him.

"Oh, God," he pleaded, "make her understand!"

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It was getting late. He had to drive fifty miles, and fifty miles back, and leave Zengler's truck and get home before his parents got there. And somehow he'd have to explain about the tank.

The darkness deepened, and the moon had not yet appeared. Lights went off in the barn as Carl finished up and headed for home. He could hear the cattle on the other side of the pasture. He stumbled frantically up and down the ramp. There must be some way . . .

He leaped down, and ran for Zengler's shed. Maybe a rope . . .

He stopped before he got there, and turned back. How could a rope help? He couldn't drag her out of the water. Was she afraid of the air? But she'd gotten from the place the ship came down over to the water. He turned back towards the truck, turned again, and retraced his steps. A light—perhaps if he could light the tank she could see what he wanted her to do. Even a match might help. He fumbled wildly about the shed, knocking things about, and finding nothing.

A new fear splashed over him coldly. Perhaps there were others there. Perhaps she wouldn't want to leave by herself. Suppose there were dozens of them?

He started to run back to the truck, and stopped abruptly as he heard — something. Something, followed by a splash. He ran again.

A wet trail led up the ramp and into the truck. The truck was flooded with the tank's overflow. "She did it!" he gasped. He leaped up the ramp, and looked into the tank. She was there, the closest he had ever seen her, a dark form somehow shimmering and dimly luminescent. He threw the ramp and the buckets into the truck, and put up the tailgate. With a wild song of joy throbbing in his throat he started the motor and got the truck in gear.

He took a route that would carry him around Harwell on back roads. He had studied maps —how he studied them!—and he wanted to keep to the country roads most of the way. But he would have to hurry. He had no idea how long the girl could live in that tank of water.

He had only been underway a few minutes when, topping a hill his lights outlined a car parked by the roadside. He recognized the long lines of Zengler's new Cadillac, the only one in the township. He caught a glimpse of a pair of heads close together in the front seat, and guessed that it would be Roy Zengler, out with some girl too young to know better.

His foot dug hard at the accelerator. As the truck picked up speed he glanced at the side-view mirror. He saw the light flash on the Cadillac as Roy flung open the door and leaped out. As long as Walt could see him he was standing in the road,

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staring after the disappearing truck.

He thought with reckless abandon, "He'll tell. They'll go to the quarry, just to make sure, and they'll find the truck gone. And they'll start looking for it. They'll think some kids took it for a joy ride, and they'll be looking around Harwell, but they'll probably catch me on the way back." He felt a twinge of uneasiness, but he told himself boldly that what happened didn't matter—on the way back. The truck roared on smoothly, powerfully.

He was only ten miles from the lake when he had to risk a stretch of main highway. Now he was beginning to worry about the girl. Should he stop somewhere, and try to change the water in the tank? Or should he concentrate on getting to the lake as soon as possible? He just did not know, and he drove on helplessly, using side streets when he could to pass through two small towns.

Traffic on the highway was light, and Walt was so completely lost in his thoughts that he did not notice the car approaching him from the rear. He did not notice until it pulled alongside and the red light flashed, and he realized that a state trooper was ordering him to stop. His numbed hands and feet obediently made the proper motions. The truck eased off the road and halted. The police car stopped behind him. Then, as the trooper got out and walked forward, he jammed the truck into gear.

For precious seconds the trooper seemed bewildered. He stood outlined in the lights of his car, waving his hands. Suddenly, as Walt risked another glance at the mirror, one hand spouted fire. "He's shooting at me," Walt thought. "The tires—if he hits a tire—"

Glass tinkled behind him as the rear window shattered, and the bullet thudded into the roof of the cab. The fire flashed again, and again, and then the truck nosed over a rise and was safe. Walt drove with the accelerator crushed down to the floor, peering anxiously beyond the racing glow of his lights. A dirt road veered off at a sharp angle to the right, and he made the turn with screaming brakes. He found himself on a winding country road. Around a curve and out-of-sight of the highway he switched off his lights. A farm house beckoned, and he slowed and skidded into the driveway, rolled as far as the barn, and turned sharply to come to a stop between the barn and a corn crib. Seconds later the police car roared past and disappeared.

A yard light came on. A man opened the farm house door and stood looking out at him. Walt backed up, turned, and drove back to the highway. He followed the highway for a short distance, took the first turn to the left, and breathed freely once

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more as the truck bounced along a rough dirt road. At the next crossroad he turned right, and headed for the lake.

In the moon's half-light the gently tossing water was beautiful. Walt drove past an unoccupied summer cottage, turned on the edge of the beach, and backed towards the water. A few yards short of his goal his wheels spun in the loose sand, and dug themselves in.

Walt leaped out and dropped the tailgate. Water soaked his knees as he hauled himself up. He placed the ramp into position, and then, as he turned, a stream of water brushed his foot. He knelt, fumbled in the darkness, and found the holes. The trooper's last shot had struck the tank. One had sliced a long gash in the side,

And the tank was two-thirds empty.

With a moan he seized the buckets and ran for the lake. For the moment he had no thought that the shots might have struck the girl. He thought only of life-giving water. He splashed into the lake, dipped the buckets, and raced back to the truck. Again and again he made the trip, until his breath came in tormented jerks and his aching legs could carry him no faster than a plodding walk. Still he worked on, dumping water into the tank, and seeing it gush forth through the holes.

He lost all sense of time. The water level in the tank rose slowly, and he began to pause, each time, before he lifted the full buckets from the lake. Suddenly it occurred to him that the girl might already be dead, that the bullets might have killed her even if the stale water had not. He dropped the buckets and forced his weary body to run.

Then he saw her, stumbling down the ramp and staggering towards him— towards the lake. She moved awkwardly, her feet churning in the sand, and as he hurried to meet her she fell at his feet with weird, whistling gasps.

He bent over to help her, and fell back with a cry of horror.

Her face was a gruesome, rubbery mask, her eyes large and sunken. She had no nose. Needle-like fangs protruded from her gaping, gasping mouth. Her hair, her lovely, flowing hair, was short tufts of fur that covered her back from the crown of her head to the base of her spine. The glimmering dark green fabric that she wore was her flesh, spongy and slimy to the touch.

As he stared helplessly, she lurched to her feet, staggered forward, and sprawled at the water's edge with her head submerged. A moment later her feet kicked and tore at the sand, and she slid into the water and disappeared.

Walt stood paralyzed, unable to move, or think, or do anything but stare bewilderedly at the ruffled sand and the lapping waves. He did not hear the car

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drive up and stop. He did not notice the lights that pinioned him against the watery horizon. He heard nothing until the trooper approached with a sharp command. Then he turned slowly, and raised his hands.

The trooper walked towards him cautiously, stared at his face, and blurted out, "Why you're only a kid!"

Walt said nothing.

The trooper searched him deftly, stepped back, and signaled him to drop his hands. "That wasn't very smart. What were you trying to do?"

Walt shook his head. The enormity of what he had done horrified him. The truck, stolen and damaged. The tank, which his father would have to pay for. Running away from the police. And now he'd have to face his parents. What could he tell them? What could he tell anyone?

A few yards out from shore, something broke water with an echoing splash—something big. The trooper whirled. "Good Lord! What was that?"

Walt shrugged wearily. "Only a fish," he said, still numb from the experience.

THE END

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STAR MOTHER

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

A touching story of the most enduring love in all eternity.

THAT night her son was the first star.

She stood motionless in the garden, one hand pressed against her heart, watching him rise above the fields where he had played as a boy, where he had worked as a young man; and she wondered whether he was thinking of those fields now, whether he was thinking of her standing alone in the April night with her memories; whether he was thinking of the verandahed house behind her, with its empty rooms and silent halls, that once upon a time had been his birthplace.

Higher still and higher he rose in the southern sky, and then, when he had reached his zenith, he dropped swiftly down past the dark edge of the Earth and disappeared from sight. A boy grown up too soon, riding round and round the world on a celestial carousel, encased in an airtight metal capsule in an airtight metal chariot . . .

Why don't they leave the stars alone? she thought. *Why don't they leave the stars to God?*

The general's second telegram came early the next morning: *Explorer XII doing splendidly. Expect to bring your son down sometime tomorrow.*

She went about her work as usual, collecting the eggs and allocating them in their cardboard boxes, then setting off in the station wagon on her Tuesday morning run. She had expected a deluge of questions from her customers. She was not disappointed. "Is Terry really way up there all alone, Martha?" "Aren't you *scared*, Martha?" "I do hope they can get him back

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down all right, Martha." She supposed it must have given them quite a turn to have their egg woman change into a star mother overnight.

She hadn't expected the TV interview, though, and she would have avoided it if it had been politely possible. But what could she do when the line of cars and trucks pulled into the drive and the technicians got out and started setting up their equipment in the backyard? What could she say when the suave young man came up to her and said, "We want you to know that we're all very proud of your boy up there, ma'am, and we hope you'll do us the honor of answering a few questions."

Most of the questions concerned Terry, as was fitting. From the way the suave young man asked them, though, she got the impression that he was trying to prove that her son was just like any other average American boy, and such just didn't happen to be the case. But whenever she opened her mouth to mention, say, how he used to study till all hours of the night, or how difficult it had been for him to make friends because of his shyness, or the fact that he had never gone out for football —whenever she started to mention any of these things, the suave young man was in great haste to interrupt her and to twist her words, by requestioning, into a different meaning altogether, till Terry's behavior pattern seemed to coincide with the behavior pattern which the suave young man apparently considered the norm, but which, if followed, Martha was sure, would produce not young men bent on exploring space but young men bent on exploring trivia.

A few of the questions concerned herself: Was Terry her only child? ("Yes.") What had happened to her husband? ("He was killed in the Korean War.") What did she think of the new law granting star mothers top priority on any and all information relating to their sons? ("I think it's a fine law . . . It's too bad they couldn't have shown similar humanity toward the war mothers of World War II.")

It was late in the afternoon by the time the TV crew got everything repacked into their cars and trucks and made their departure. Martha fixed herself a light supper, then donned an old suede jacket of Terry's and went out into the garden to wait for the sun to go down. According to the time table the general had outlined in his first telegram, Terry's first Tuesday night passage wasn't due to occur till 9:05. But it seemed only right that she should be outside when the stars started to come out. Presently they did, and she watched them wink on, one by one, in the deepening darkness of the sky. She'd never been much of a one for the stars; most of her life she'd been much too busy on Earth to bother with

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things celestial. She could remember, when she was much younger and Bill was courting her, looking up at the moon sometimes; and once in a while, when a star fell, making a wish. But this was different. It was different because now she had a personal interest in the sky, a new affinity with its myriad inhabitants.

And how bright they became when you kept looking at them! They seemed to come alive, almost, pulsing brilliantly down out of the blackness of the night . . . And they were different colors, too, she noticed with a start. Some of them were blue and some were red, others were yellow . . . green . . . orange . . .

It grew cold in the April garden and she could see her breath. There was a strange crispness, a strange clarity about the night, that she had never known before . . . She glanced at her watch, was astonished to see that the hands indicated two minutes after nine. Where had the time gone? Tremulously she faced the southern horizon . . . and saw her Terry appear in his shining chariot, riding up the star-pebbled path of his orbit, a star in his own right, dropping swiftly now, down, down, and out of sight beyond the dark wheeling mass of the Earth . . . She took a deep, proud breath, realized that she was wildly waving her hand and let it fall slowly to her side. Make a wish! she thought, like a little girl, and she wished him pleasant dreams and a safe return and wrapped the wish in all her love and cast it starward.

Sometime tomorrow, the general's telegram had said—

That meant sometime today!

She rose with the sun and fed the chickens, fixed and ate her breakfast, collected the eggs and put them in their cardboard boxes, then started out on her Wednesday morning run. "My land, Martha, I don't see how you stand it with him way up there! Doesn't it get on your *nerves?*" ("Yes . . . Yes, it does.") "Martha, when are they bringing him back down?" ("Today . . . *Today*!") "It must be wonderful being a star mother, Martha." ("Yes, it is—in a way.")

Wonderful . . . and terrible.

If only he can last it out for a few more hours, she thought. If only they can bring him down safe and sound. Then the vigil will be over, and some other mother can take over the awesome responsibility of having a son become a star—

If only . . .

The general's third telegram arrived that afternoon: *Regret to inform you that meteorite impact on satellite hull severely damaged capsule - detachment mechanism, making ejection impossible. Will make every effort to find another means of accomplishing your son's return.*

Terry!—

See the little boy playing beneath the maple tree, moving his

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tiny cars up and down the tiny streets of his make-believe village; the little boy, his fuzz of hair gold in the sunlight, his cherub-cheeks pink in the summer wind—

Terry!—

Up the lane the blue-denimed young man walks, swinging his thin tanned arms, his long legs making near-grownup strides over the sun-seared grass; the sky blue and bright behind him, the song of cicada rising and falling in the hazy September air—

Terry . . .

—probably won't get a chance to write you again before take-off, but don't worry, Ma. The Explorer XII *is the greatest bird they ever built. Nothing short of a direct meteorite hit can hurt it, and the odds are a million to one . . .*

Why don't they leave the stars alone? Why don't they leave the stars to God?

The afternoon shadows lengthened on the lawn and the sun grew red and swollen over the western hills. Martha fixed supper, tried to eat, and couldn't. After a while, when the light began to fade, she slipped into Terry's jacket and went outside.

Slowly the sky darkened and the stars began to appear. At length *her* star appeared, but its swift passage blurred before her eyes. Tires crunched on the gravel then, and headlights washed the darkness from the drive. A car door slammed.

Martha did not move. *Please God,* she thought, *let it be Terry,* even though she knew that it couldn't possibly be Terry. Footsteps sounded behind her, paused. Someone coughed softly. She turned then—

"Good evening, ma'am."

She saw the circlet of stars on the gray epaulet; she saw the stern handsome face; she saw the dark tired eyes. And she knew. Even before he spoke again, she knew—

"The same meteorite that damaged the ejection mechanism, ma'am. It penetrated the capsule, too. We didn't find out till just a while ago—but there was nothing we could have done anyway . . . Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Yes. I'm all right."

"I wanted to express my regrets personally. I know how you must feel."

"It's all right."

"We will, of course, make every effort to bring back his . . . remains . . . so that he can have a fitting burial on Earth."

"No," she said.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

She raised her eyes to the patch of sky where her son had passed in his shining metal sarcophagus. Sirius blossomed there, blue-white and beautiful. She raised her eyes still higher —and beheld the vast parterre of Orion with its central motif of vivid forget-me-nots, its far-flung blooms of Betelguese and Rigel, of Bellatrix and Saiph . . . And higher yet—and there

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flamed the exquisite flower beds of Taurus and Gemini, there burgeoned the riotous wreath of the Crab; there lay the pulsing petals of the Pleiades . . . And down the ecliptic garden path, wafted by a stellar breeze, drifted the ocher rose of Mars . . .

"No," she said again.

The general had raised his eyes, too; now, slowly, he lowered them. "I think I understand, ma'am. And I'm glad that's the way you want it . . . The stars *are* beautiful tonight, aren't they."

"More beautiful than they've ever been," she said.

After the general had gone, she looked up once more at the vast and variegated garden of the sky where her son lay buried, then she turned and walked slowly back to the memoried house. **THE END**

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It was a big joke on all concerned. When you look back, the whole thing really began because his father had a sense of humor. Oh, the name fit all right, but can you imagine naming your son . . .

NOBLE REDMAN

By J. F. BONE

ILLUSTRATED by GRAYAM

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A PAIR of words I heartily detest are *noble* and *redman*, particularly when they occur together. Some of my egghead friends from the Hub tell me that I shouldn't, since they're merely an ancient colloquialism used to describe a race of aborigines on the American land mass.

The American land mass? Where? Why—on Earth, of course—where would ancestors come from? Yes—I know it's not nice to mention that word. It's an obscenity. No one likes to be reminded that his ancestors came from there. It's like calling a man a son of a sloat. But it's the truth. Our ancestors came from Earth and nothing we can do is going to change it. And despite the fact that we're the rulers of a good sized segment of the galaxy, we're nothing but transplanted Earthmen.

I suppose I'm no better than most of the citizens you find along the peripheral strips of Martian dome cities. But I might have been if it hadn't been for Noble Redman. No—not *the* noble redman—just Noble Redman. It's a name, not a description, although as a description his surname could apply, since he *was* red. His skin was red, his hair was red, his eyes had reddish flecks in their irisis, and their whites were red like they were inflamed. Even his teeth had a reddish tinge. Damndest guy I ever saw. Redman was descriptive enough—but Noble! Ha! that character had all the nobility of a Sand Nan—.

I met him in Marsport. I was fairly well-heeled, having just finished guiding a couple of Centaurian tourists through the ruins of K'nar. They didn't believe me when I told them to watch out for Sand Nans. Claimed that there were no such things. They were kinda violent about it. Superstition—they said. So when the Nan heaved itself up out of the sand, they weren't ready at all. They froze long enough for it to get in two shots with its stingers. They were paralyzed of course, but I wasn't, and a Nan isn't quick enough to hit a running target. So I was out of range when the Nan turned its attention to the Centaurians and started to feed. I took a few pictures of the Nan finishing off the second tourist—the female one. It wasn't very pretty, but you learn to keep a camera handy when you're a guide. It gets you out of all sorts of legal complications later. The real bad thing about it was that the woman must have gotten stuck with an unripe stinger because she didn't

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go quietly like her mate. She kept screaming right up to the end. I felt bad about it, but there wasn't anything I could do. You don't argue with a Nan without a blaster, and the Park Service doesn't allow weapons in Galactic Parks.

Despite the fact that I had our conversation on tape and pictures to prove what happened, the Park cops took a dim view of the whole affair. They cancelled my license, but what the hell—I wasn't cut out for a guide. So when I got back to Marsport, I put in a claim for my fee, and since their money had gone into the Nan with them, the Claims Court allowed that I had the right to garnishee the deceaseds' personal property, which I did. So I was richer by one Starflite class yacht, a couple of hundred ounces of industrial gold, and a lot of personal effects which I sold to Abe Feldstein for a hundred and fifty munits.

Abe wasn't very generous, but what's a Martian to do with Centaurian gear? Nothing those midgets use is adaptable to us. Even their yacht, a six passenger job, would barely hold three normal-sized people and they'd be cramped as kampas in a can. But the hull and drives were in good shape and I figured that if I sunk a couple of thousand munits into remodelling, the ship'd sell for at least twenty thousand—if I could find someone who wanted a three passenger job. That was the problem.

Abe offered me five thousand for her as she stood—but I wasn't having any—at least not until I'd gotten rid of the gold in her fuel reels. That stuff's worth money to the spacelines—about fifty munits per ounce. It's better even than lead as fuel—doesn't clog the tubes and gives better acceleration.

Well—like I said—I was flusher than I had been since Triworld Freight Lines ran afoul of the cops on Callisto for smuggling tekla nuts. So I went down to Otto's place on the strip to wash some of that Dryland dust off my tonsils. And that's where I met Redman.

He came up the street from the South airlock—a big fellow—walking kinda unsteady, his respirator hanging from his thick neck. He was burned a dark reddish black from the Dryland sun and looked like he was on his last legs when he turned into Otto's. He staggered up to the bar.

"Water," he said.

Otto passed him a pitcher

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and damned if the guy didn't drink it straight down!

"That'll be ten munits," Otto said.

"For water?" the man asked.

"You're on Mars," Otto reminded him.

"Oh," the big fellow said, and jerked a few lumps of yellow metal out of a pocket and dropped it on the bar. "Will this do?" he asked.

Otto's eyes damn near bulged out of their sockets. "Where'd you get that stuff?" he demanded. "That's gold!"

"I know."

"It'll do fine." Otto picked out a piece that musta weighed an ounce. "Have another pitcher."

"That's enough," the big fellow said. "Keep the change."

"Yes, sir!" You'da thought from Otto's voice that he was talking to the Prince Regent. "Just *where* did you say you found it."

"I didn't say. But I found it out there." He waved a thick arm in the direction of the Drylands.

By this time a couple of sharpies sitting at one of the tables pricked up their ears, removed their pants from their chairs and began closing in. But I beat them to it.

"My name's Wallingford," I said. "Cyril Wallingford."

"So what?" he snaps.

"So if you don't watch out you'll be laying in an alley with all that nice yellow stuff in someone else's pocket."

"I can take care of myself," he said.

"I don't doubt it," I said, looking at the mass of him. He was sure king-sized. "But even a guy as big as you is cold meat for a little guy with a Kelly."

He looked at me a bit more friendly. "Maybe I'm wrong about you, friend. But you look shifty."

"I'll admit my face isn't my fortune," I said sticking out what little chin I had and looking indignant. "But I'm honest. Ask anyone here." I looked around. There were three men in the place I didn't have something on, and I was faster than they. I was a fair hand with a Kelly in those days and I had a reputation. There was a chorus of nods and the big fellow looked satisfied. He stuck out a hamsized hand.

"Me name's Redman," he said. "Noble Redman. My father had a sense of humor." He grinned at me, giving me a good view of his pink teeth.

I grinned back. "Glad to know you," I replied. I gave

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the sharpies a hard look and they moved off and left us alone. The big fellow interested me. Fact is—anyone with money interested me—but I'm not stupid greedy. It took me about three minutes to spot him for a phony. Anyone who's lived out in the Drylands knows that there just *isn't* any gold there. Iron, sure, the whole desert's filthy with it, but if there is anything higher on the periodic table than the rare earths, nobody had found it yet—and this guy with his light clothes, street boots and low capacity respirator—Hell! he couldn't stay out there more than two days if he wanted to—and besides, the gold was refined. The lumps looked like they were cut off something bigger—a bar, for instance.

"A bar!—a bar of gold! My brain started working. K'nar was about two days out, and there had always been rumors about Martian gold even though no one ever found any. Maybe this tourist had come through. If so, he was worth cultivating. For he was a tourist. He certainly wasn't a citizen. There wasn't a Martian alive with a skin like his. Redman—the name fitted all right. But what was his game? I couldn't figure it. And the more I tried the less I succeeded. It was a certainty he was no prospector despite his burned skin. His hands gave him away. They were big and dirty, but the pink nails were smooth and the red palms soft and uncalloused. There wasn't even a blister on them. He could have been fresh from the Mercury Penal Colony—but those guys were burned black—not red, and he didn't have the hangdog look of an ex-con.

He talked about prospecting on Callisto—looking for heavy metals. Ha! There were less heavy metals on Callisto than there were on Mars. But he had listeners. His gold and the way he spent it drew them like honey draws flies. But finally I got the idea. Somehow, subtly, he turned the conversation around to gambling which was a subject everyone knew. That brought up tales of the old games, poker, faro, three card monte, blackjack, roulette—and crapshooting.

"I'll bet there isn't a dice game in town." Redman said.

"You'd lose," I answered. I had about all this maneuvering I could take. Bring it out in the open—see what this guy was after. Maybe I could get something out of it in the process. From the looks of his hands he was a pro. He could

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probably make dice and cards sing sweet music, and if he could I wanted to be with him when he did. The more I listened, the more I was sure he was setting something up.

"Where is this game?" he asked incuriously.

"Over Abie Feldstein's hockshop," I said. "But it's private. You have to know someone to get in."

"You steering for it?" He asked.

I shook my head, half puzzled. I wasn't quite certain what he meant.

"Are you touting for the game?' he asked.

The light dawned. But the terms he used! Archaic was the only word for them!

"No," I said, "I'm not fronting for Abie. Fact is, if you want some friendly advice, stay outa there."

"Why—the game crooked?"

"There it was again, the old fashioned word. "Yes, it's bowed," I said. "It's bowed like a sine wave—in both directions. Honesty isn't one of Abie's best policies."

He suddenly looked eager. "Can I get in?" he asked.

"Not through me. I have no desire to watch a slaughter of the innocent. Hang onto your gold, Redman. It's safer." I kept watching him. His face smoothed out into an expressionless mask—a gambler's face. "But if you're really anxious, there's one of Abie's fronts just coming in the door. Ask him, if you want to lose your shirt."

"Thanks," Redman said.

I didn't wait to see what happened. I left Otto's and laid a courseline for Abie's. I wanted to be there before Redman arrived. Not only did I want an alibi, but I'd be in better position to sit in. Also I didn't want a couple of Abie's goons on my neck just in case Redman won. There was no better way to keep from getting old than to win too many munits in Abie's games.

I'd already given Abie back fifty of the hundred and fifty he'd paid me for the Centaurians' gear, and was starting in on the hundred when Redman walked in flanked by the frontman. He walked straight back to the dice table and stood beside it, watching the play. It was an oldstyle table built for six-faced dice, and operated on percentage—most of the time. It was a moneymaker, which was the only reason Abie kept it. People liked these old-fashioned games. They were part of the Martian tradition. A couple of local citizens and a dozen tour-

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ists were crowded around it, and the diceman's flat emotionless voice carried across the intermittent click and rattle of the dice across the green cloth surface.

I dropped out of the blackjack game after dropping another five munits, and headed slowly towards the dice table. One of the floormen looked at me curiously since I didn't normally touch dice, but whatever he thought he kept to himself. I joined the crowd, and watched for awhile.

Redman was sitting in the game, betting at random. He played the field, come and don't come, and occasionally number combinations. When it came his turn at the dice he made two passes, a seven and a four the hard way, let the pile build and crapped out on the next roll. Then he lost the dice with a seven after an eight. There was nothing unusual about it, except that after one run of the table I noticed that he won more than he lost. He was pocketing most of his winnings—but I was watching him close and keeping count. That was enough for me. I got into the game, followed his lead, duplicating his bets. And I won too.

People are sensitive. Pretty quick they began to see that Redman and I were winning and started to follow our leads. I gave them a dirty look and dropped out, and after four straight losses, Redman did likewise.

He went over to the roulette wheel and played straight red and black. He won there too. And after awhile he went back to the dice table. I cashed in. Two thousand was fair enough and there was no reason to make myself unpopular. But I couldn't help staying to watch the fun. I could feel it coming—a sense of something impending.

Redman's face was flushed a dull vermilion, his eyes glittered with ruby glints, and his breath came faster. The dice had a grip on him just like cards do on me. He was a gambler all right—one of the fool kind that play it cozy until they're a little ahead and then plunge overboard and drown.

"Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen," the diceman droned. "Eight is the point." His rake swept over the board collecting a few munit plaques on the wrong spots. Redman had the dice. He rolled. Eight—a five and a three. "Let it ride," he said,—and I jumped nervously. He should have said, "Leave it." But the diceman was no purist. Another roll—seven. The diceman

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looked inquiringly at Redman. The big man shook his head, and rolled again—four. Three rolls later he made his point. Then he rolled another seven, another seven, and an eleven. And the pile of munits in front of him had become a respectable heap.

"One moment, sir," the diceman said as he raked in the dice. He rolled them in his hands, tossed them in the air, and handed them back.

"That's enough," Redman said. "Cash me in."

"But—"

"I said I had enough."

"Your privilege, sir."

"One more then," Redman said, taking the dice and stuffing munits into his jacket. He left a hundred on the board, rolled, and came up with a three. He grinned. "Thought I'd pushed my luck as far as it would go," he said, as he stuffed large denomination bills into his pockets.

I sidled up to him. "Get out of here, buster," I said. "That diceman switched dice on you. You're marked now."

"I saw him," Redman replied in a low voice, not looking at me. "He's not too clever, but I'll stick around, maybe try some more roulette."

"It's your funeral," I whispered through motionless lips.

He turned away and I left. There was no reason to stay, and our little talk just might have drawn attention. They could have a probe tuned on us now. I went down the strip to Otto's and waited. It couldn't have been more than a half hour later that Redman came by. He was looking over his shoulder and walking fast. His pockets, I noted, were bulging. So I went out the back door, cut down the serviceway to the next radius street, and flagged a cab.

"Where to, mister?" the jockey said.

"The strip—and hurry."

The jockey fed propane to the turbine and we took off like a scorched zarth. "Left or right?" he asked as the strip leaped at us. I crossed my fingers, estimated the speed of Redman's walk, and said, "Right."

We took the corner on two of our three wheels and there was Redman, walking fast toward the south airlock, and behind him, half-running, came two of Abie's goons.

"Slow down—*fast*!" I yapped, and was crushed against the back of the front seat as the jock slammed his foot on the brakes. "In here!" I yelled at Redman as I swung the rear door open.

His reflexes were good. He

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hit the floor in a flat dive as the purple streak of a stat blast flashed through the space where he had been. The jockey needed no further stimulation. He slammed his foot down and we took off with a screech of polyprene, whipped around the next corner and headed for the hub, the cops, and safety.

"Figured you was jerking some guy, Cyril," the jockey said over his shoulder. "But who is he?"

Redman picked himself off the floor as I swore under my breath. The jockey *would* have to know me. Abie'd hear of my part in this by morning and my hide wouldn't be worth the price of a mangy rat skin. I had to get out of town—fast! And put plenty of distance between me and Marsport. This dome—this planet—wasn't going to be healthy for quite a while. Abie was the most unforgiving man I knew where money was concerned, and if the large, coarse notes dripping from Redman's pockets were any indication, there was lots of money concerned.

"Where to now, Cyril?" the jockey asked.

There was only one place to go. I damned the greed that made me pick Redman up. I figured that he'd be grateful to the tune of a couple of kilomunits but what was a couple of thousand if Abie thought I was mixed up in this? Lucky I had a spaceship even if she was an unconverted Centaurian. I could stand the cramped quarters a lot better than I could take a session in Abie's back room. I'd seen what happened to guys who went in there, and it wasn't pretty. "To the spaceport," I said, "and don't spare the hydrocarbons."

"Gotcha!" the jock said and the whine of the turbine increased another ten decibels.

"Thanks, Wallingford," Redman said. "If you hadn't pulled me out I'd have had to shoot somebody. And I don't like killing. It brings too many lawmen into the picture." He was as cool as ice. I had to admire his nerve.

"Thanks for nothing," I said. "I figured you'd be grateful in a more solid manner."

"Like this?" he thrust a handful of bills at me. There must have been four thousand in that wad. It cheered me up a little.

"Tell me where you want to get off," I said.

"You said you have a spaceship," he countered.

"I do, but it's a Centaurian job. I might be able to squeeze into it but I doubt if you could. About the only spot big

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enough for you would be the cargo hold, and the radiation'd fry you before we even made Venus."

He grinned at me. "I'll take the chance," he said.

"Okay, sucker," I thought. "You've been warned." If he came along he'd damn well go in the hold. I could cut the drives after we got clear of Mars and dump him out—after removing his money, of course. "Well," I said aloud, "it's your funeral."

"You're always saying that," he said with chuckle in his voice.

We checked out at the airlock and drove out to the spaceport over the sand-filled roadbed that no amount of work ever kept clean. We cleared the port office, drew spacesuits from Post Supply, and went out to my yacht. Redman looked at her, his heart in his eyes. He seemed overwhelmed by it.

"Lord! she's beautiful!" he breathed, as he looked at the slim polished length standing on her broad fins, nose pointed skyward.

"Just a Starflite-class yacht," I said.

"Look, Cyril," he said. "Will you sell her?"

"If we get to Venus alive and you still want to buy her, she'll cost you—" I hesitated, "twenty-five thousand."

"Done!" he said. It came so fast that I figured I should have asked for fifty.

"The fuel will be extra," I said. "Fifty munits an ounce. There's maybe ten pounds of it."

"How far will that take me?"

"About ten lightyears at cruising speed. Gold is economical."

"That should be far enough," he said with a faint smile.

We drew the boarding ladder down and prepared to squeeze aboard. As I figured it, we had plenty of time, but I hadn't counted on that nosy guard at the check station, or maybe that character at the south airlock of the dome, because I was barely halfway up the ladder to the hatch when I heard the howl of a racing turbine and two headlights came cutting through the night over the nearest dune. The speed with which that car was coming argued no good.

"Let's go," I said, making with the feet.

"I'm right behind you," Redman said into my left heel. "Hurry! Those guys are out for blood!"

I tumbled through the lock and wiggled up the narrow

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passageway. By some contortionist's trick Redman came through the hatch feet first, an odd looking gun in his hand. Below us the turbo screeched to a stop and men boiled out, blasters in hand. They didn't wait—just started firing. Electrostatic discharges leaped from the metal of the ship, but they were in too much of a hurry. The gun in Redman's fist steadied as he took careful aim. A tiny red streak hissed out of the muzzle—and the roof fell in! A thunderous explosion and an eye-wrenching burst of light filled the passageway through the slit in the rapidly closing hatch. The yacht rocked on her base like tree in a gale, as the hatch slammed shut.

"What in hell was *that?*" I yelped.

"Just a low yield nuclear blast," Redman said. "About two tons. Those lads won't bother us any more."

"You fool!—you stupid moronic abysmal fool!" I said dully. "You're not content to get Abie on our heels. Now you've triggered off the whole Galactic Patrol. Don't you know that nuclear weapons are banned—that they've been banned ever since our ancestors destroyed Earth—that their use calls for the execution of the user? Just where do you come from that you don't know the facts of life?"

"Earth," Redman said.

It left me numb. Any fool knew that there was no life on that radioactive hell. Even now, spacers could see her Van Allen bands burning with blue-green fire. Earth was a sterile world—a horrible example, the only forbidden planet in the entire galaxy, a galactic chamber of horrors ringed with automatic beacons and patrol ships to warn strangers off. We Martians, Earth's nearest neighbor, had the whole history of that last suicidal war drummed into us as children. After all, we *were* the cradle of Galactic civilization even though we got that way by being driven off Earth—and feeling that almost any place would be better than Mars. Mars iron built the ships and powered the atomics that had conquered the galaxy. But we knew Earth better than most, and to hear those words from Redman's lips was a shock.

"You're a damn liar!" I exploded.

"You're entitled to your opinion," Redman said, "but you should know the truth when it is told to you. I *am* from Earth!"

"But—", I said.

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"You'd better get out of here," Redman said, "your Patrol will be here shortly."

I was thinking that, too. So I wiggled my way up to the control room, braced myself against the walls and fired the jets. Acceleration crushed me flat as the ship lifted and bored out into space.

As quickly as I could, I cut the jets so the Patrol couldn't trace us by our ion trail, flipped the negative inertia generator on and gave the ship one minimal blast that hurled her out of sight. We coasted at a few thousand miles per second along the plane of the ecliptic while we took stock.

Redman had wedged himself halfway into the control room and eyed my cramped body curiously. "It's a good thing you're a runt," he said. "Otherwise we'd be stuck down there." He laughed. "You look like a jack in the box—all coiled up ready to spring out."

But I was in no mood for humor. Somehow I felt that I'd been conned. "What do I get out of this?" I demanded.

"A whole skin—at least for awhile."

"That won't do me any good unless I can take it somewhere."

"Don't worry," Redman said. "They don't give a damn about you. It's me they want, turn on your radio and see."

I flipped the switch and a voice came into the control room—"remind you that this is a Galactic emergency! The Patrol has announced that an inhabitant of Earth has been on Mars! This individual is dangerously radioactive. A reward of one hundred thousand Galactic munits will be paid to the person who gives information leading to his death or capture. I repeat,—*one hundred thousand munits!* The man's description is as follows: Height 180 centimeters, weight 92 kilograms, eyes reddish brown, hair red. A peculiarity which makes him easily recognized is the red color of his skin. He is armed with a nuclear weapon and is dangerous. When last seen he was leaving Marsport spacefield. Starflite class yacht, registration number CY 127439. He has a citizen with him, probably a hostage. If seen, notify the nearest Patrol ship."

I looked at Redman. The greed must have shone from me like a beacon. "A hundred grand!" I said softly.

"Try and collect," Redman said.

"I'm not going to," I said and turned three separate

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plans to capture him over in my head.

"They won't work," Redman said. He grinned nastily. "And don't worry about radioactivity. I'm no more contaminated than you are."

"Yeah?—and just how do you live on that hotbox without being contaminated?" I asked.

"Simple. The surface isn't too hot in the first place. Most of the stuff is in the Van Allen belts. Second, we live underground. And third we're protected."

"How?"

"Where do you think this red skin comes from? It isn't natural. Even you should know that. Actually we had the answer to protection during the Crazy Years before the blowup when everybody talked peace and built missiles. A bacteriologist named Anderson discovered it while working with radiation sterilized food. He isolated a whole family of bacteria from the food that not only survived, but lived normally in the presence of heavy doses of radiation. The microbes all had one thing in common—a peculiar reddish pigment that protected them.

"Luckily, the military of his nation—the United States, I think they called it, thought that this pigment might be a useful protective shield for supplies. Extracts were made and tested before the Blowup came, and there was quite a bit of it on hand.

"But the real hero of protection was a general named Ardleigh. He ordered every man and woman in his command inoculated with the extract right after the Blowup —when communications were disorganized and commanders of isolated units had unchallengable power. He was later found to be insane, but his crazy idea was right. The inoculations killed ten per cent of his command and turned those who lived a bright red, but none of the living showed a sign of radiation sickness after they received the extract.

"By this time your ancestors—the Runners—had gone, and those who stayed were too busy trying to remain alive to worry much about them. The "Double A" vaccine—named for Anderson and Ardleigh—was given to every person and animal that could be reached, but it was only a small fraction of the population that survived. The others died. But enough men and animals remained to get a toehold on their ruined world, and they slowly rebuilt.

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We had forgotten about you Runners—but it seems you didn't forget us. You sealed us off—forced us to remain on Earth. And by the time we were again ready for space, you were able to prevent us. But we will not be denied forever. It took an entire planet working together to get me on Mars to learn your secrets. And when I got here, I found that I wouldn't have time to learn. We had forgotten one simple thing—my skin color. It isn't normal here and there is no way of changing it since the extract combines permanently with body cells. So I had to do the next best thing—obtain a sample of your technology and bring it to Earth. I planned at first to get enough money to buy a ship. But those creeps in Marsport don't lose like gentlemen. I damn near had to beat my way out of that joint. And when a couple of them came after me, I figured it was all up. I could kill them of course, but that wouldn't solve anything. Since I can't fly one of your ships yet. I couldn't steal one—and I wouldn't have time to buy one because I was pretty sure the Patrol would be after me as soon as the rumors of a red man got around. You see—*they* know what we look like and its their job to keep us cooped up—"

"Hmm," I said.

"Why do they do it?" Redman asked. "We're just as human as you are." He shrugged. "At any rate," he finished, "I was at the end of my rope when you came along. But you have a ship—you can fly—and you'll take me back to Earth."

"I will?" I asked.

He nodded. "I can make it worth your while," he said.

"How?" I asked.

"Money. You'll do anything for money." Redman looked at me soberly. "You're a repulsive little weasel, Cyril, and I would distrust you thoroughly except that I know you as well as you know me. That's the virtue of being human. We understand each other without words. You are a cheap, chiseling, doublecrossing, money-grabbing heel. You'd kick your mother's teeth out for a price. And for what I'm going to offer you, you'll jump at the chance to help us—but I don't have to tell you that. You know already."

"What do you mean—know already?" I said. "Can I read your mind?"

"Do you mean to tell me—" Redman began. And then a

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peculiar smile crossed his face, a light of dawning comprehension. "Why no," he said, "why should you be telepathic—why should you? And to think I kept hiding—" he broke off and looked at me with a superior look a man gives his dog. Affectionate but pitying. "No wonder there were no psych fields protecting that dice game—and I thought—" he started to laugh.

And I knew then why the Patrol had sealed Earth off. Mutated by radiation, speeded up in their evolution by the effects of the Blowup, Earthmen were as far ahead of us mentally as we were ahead of them technologically. To let these telepaths, these telekinetics — and God knows what else—loose on the Galaxy would be like turning a bunch of hungry kelats loose in a herd of fat sloats. My head buzzed like it was filled with a hive of bees. For the first time in years I stopped thinking of the main chance. So help me, I was feeling *noble!"*

"Just take it easy, Cyril," Redman said. "Don't get any bright ideas."

Bright ideas! Ha! I should be getting bright ideas with a character who could read me like a book. What I needed was something else.

"If you cooperate," Redman said, "you'll be fixed for life."

"You're not kidding," I said. "I'd be fixed all right. The Patrol'd hound me all the way to Andromeda if I helped you. And don't think they wouldn't find out. While we can't read minds, we can tell when a man's lying."

"Have you ever heard of Fort Knox?" Redman asked.

"Fort Knox—Fort Knox—*fourknocks!* the thought staggered me.

"The gold I had came from there," Redman said.

Fourknocks! Sure, I'd heard of it. What citizen hadn't? They still tell stories of that fabulous hoard of gold. Tons of it buried on Earth waiting for someone with guts enough to go in and find it.

"All your ship will hold," Redman said. "After we analyze its principles."

"Five tons of gold! Six million munits! So much money! It staggered me. I'd never dreamed of that much money. Redman was right. I *would* kick my mother's teeth out if the price was right. And the price—I jumped convulsively. My arm brushed the control board, kicking off the negative inertia and slapping the axial correction jets.

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The ship spun like a top! Centrifugal force crushed me against the control room floor. Redman, an expression of pained surprise on his face before it slammed against the floor, was jammed helplessly in the corridor. I had time for one brief grin. The Patrol would zero in on us, and I'd have a hundred thousand I could spend. What could I do with six million I couldn't use?

Then hell broke out. A fire extinguisher came loose from its fastenings and started flying around the room in complete defiance of artificial gravity. Switches on the control board clicked on and off. The ship bucked, shuddered and jumped. But the spin held. Redman, crushed face down to the floor, couldn't see what he was doing. Besides—he didn't know what he was doing—but he was trying. The fire extinguisher came whizzing across the floor and cracked me on the shin. A scream of pure agony left my lips as I felt the bone snap.

"Got you!" Redman grunted, as he lifted his head against the crushing force and sighted at me like a gunner. The extinguisher reversed its flight across the room and came hurtling at my head.

"Too late!" I gloated mentally. Then the world was filled with novae and comets as the extinguisher struck. The cheerful thought that Redman was trapped because he didn't —couldn't—know how to drive a hypership was drowned in a rush of darkness.

"When I came to, my leg was aching like a thousand devils and I was lying on a rocky surface. Near—terribly near—was a jagged rock horizon cutting the black of space dotted with the blazing lights of stars. I groaned and rolled over, wincing at the double pain in leg and head. Redman was standing over me, carrying a couple of oxygen bottles and a black case. He looked odd, standing there with a load in his arms that would have crushed him flat on Mars. And then I knew. I was on an asteroid.

"But how did I get here?"

"Easy," Redman's voice came over my headphone. "Didn't anyone ever tell you an unconscious mind is easier to read than a conscious one?" He chuckled. "No," he continued, "I don't suppose they did —but it is. Indeed it is." He laid the bottles down, and put the box beside them. "I learned how to operate the ship, stopped the spin, and got her back into negative inertia before the Patrol found me.

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Found this place about an hour ago—and since you began to look like you'd live, I figured you should have a chance. So I'm leaving you a communicator and enough air to keep you alive until you can get help. But so help me—you don't deserve it. After I played square with you, you try to do this to me."

"Square!" I yelped. "Why you—"The rest of what I said was unprintable.

Redman grinned at me, his face rosy behind the glassite of his helmet—and turned away. I turned to watch him picking his way carefully back to where the yacht rested lightly on the naked rock. At the airlock he turned and waved at me. Then he squeezed inside. The lock closed. There was a brief shimmer around the ship—a briefer blast of heat, and the yacht vanished.

I turned on the communicator and called for help. I used the Patrol band. "I'll keep the transmitter turned on so you can home in on me," I broadcasted, "but get that Earthman first! He's got my money and my ship. Pick me up later, but get him now!"

I didn't know whether my message was received or not, because Redman didn't leave me any receiver other than the spacesuit intercom in my helmet. It was, I suspected, a deliberate piece of meanness on his part. So I kept talking until my voice was a hoarse croak, calling the Patrol, calling—calling—calling, until a black shark shape blotted out the stars overhead and a couple of Patrolmen in jetsuits homed in on me.

"Did you get him?" I asked.

The Patrolman bending over me shrugged his shoulders. "They haven't told me," he said.

They hauled me back to Marsport, put my leg in a cast, ran me through the lie detector, and then tossed me in jail for safekeeping. I beefed about the jail, but not too loud. As I figured it I was lucky to be out of Abie's hands.

Two days later, a Patrolman with the insignia of a Commander on his collar tabs showed up at my cell. He was apologetic. I was a hero, he said. Seems like the Patrol caught Redman trying to sneak through the asteroid belt on standard drive and blasted him out of space.

So they gave me the reward and turned me loose.

But it didn't do me any good. After taxes, it only came to twenty thousand, and Abie grabbed that before I could

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get out of town. Like I said, Abie's unforgiving where money's concerned, and Redman had taken him for over thirty kilos, which, according to Abie was my fault for lifting him and getting him out of town. After he got my twenty kilos he still figured I owed him twelve—and so I've never made it back. Every time I get a stake he grabs it, and what with the interest, I still owe him twelve.

But I still keep trying, because there's still a chance. You see, when Redman probed around in my mind to learn how to run the spaceship, he was in a hurry. He must have done something to my brain, because when he left me on that asteroid, as he turned and waved at me, I could hear him thinking that the Patrol would not be able to stop hyperships, and if he made it to Earth his people could emigrate to some clean world and stop having to inject their kids, and while they couldn't make the grade themselves, their kids could crash the Galaxy without any trouble. I got the impression that it wouldn't be too much trouble to empty Earth. Seems as though there wasn't many more than a million people left. The red color wasn't complete protection apparently.

And there's another thing. About a month after I got the reward, there was a minor complaint from Centaurus V about one of their officials who disappeared on a vacation trip to Mars. His ship was a Starflite class, Serial CY 122439. Get the idea?

So I keep watching all the incoming tourists like you. Someday I figure I'm going to run into a decolorized Earthman. They won't be able to stay away any more than the other peoples of the Galaxy. Old Mother Earth keeps dragging them back even though they've been gone for over a thousand years. Don't get the idea they want to see Mars. It's Earth that draws them. And it'll draw an Earthman's kids. And I figure that if I could read Redman's mind, I can read theirs, too even though I haven't read a thought since. It figures, does it not?"

Hey! Hold on! There's no need to run. All I want to do is collect a fifty year old bill —plus interest. Your folks owe me that much.

THE END

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THE BLONDE FROM SPACE

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

When the beautiful emissary from Coltura arrived, all the Earth was captured by her charm—or was it the other way around?

THE skies of Mars were feverish. On the brow of the copper hills that ringed the spaceship, the fiery glare was so intense that Captains Warner and Carey cringed before the blinding light. Gig Warner succumbed first, dropping to his knees on the hot sandy soil. His friend and companion came to his aid, screwing his eyes shut against the awful light, trying to help him to his feet. "Johnny! Johnny!" Gig groaned, hating his own infirmity. "What the hell's happening? What's going on?"

"I don't know," John Carey gasped. "I feel terrible . . . so weak . . ."

"Got to get back to the ship . . . radio . . ."

"Wait," Carey panted. "Think it's fading now . . ."

The skies were showing mercy at last. The monstrous, blinding fire was dimming in the heavens; the copper-colored hills softening in intensity. The two men sobbed in relief, and slowly, painfully, began struggling back towards the ship. Then, with sanctuary only yards away, the light returned, this time blue and cold and even more terrifying, brighter than before, filling them with alien dread and superstitious awe.

Then the Mirage came.

Gig Warner saw it first, and emitted a shriek of mingled horror and ecstasy, lifting his arm feebly towards the misty shape forming before their eyes. Captain Carey saw it, too, and stared in disbelief at the sight.

"It's a woman!" he said hoarsely. "So help me God, it's a woman . . ."

"Beautiful," Gig Warner whis-

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pered. "Beautiful, beautiful . . ." He began to laugh, and the sound echoed brassily among the hills. "Most beautiful woman I ever saw . . ." He tried to get to his feet, his face contorted.

"No! No," Carey said, trembling before the giant visage. "Mirage, Gig," he mumbled. "Some kind of mirage . . ."

"Beautiful!" Gig Warner screamed, rising from the hot sand and waving his arms towards the creature of the mists. "Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful . . ."

He began to run, stumbling over the shifty, treacherous sands. Carey started after him, shouting, and then no longer cared what happened to his friend. He looked up at the incredible vision overhead, and saw the deep violet eyes of the Thing, filled with tenderness and compassion. He smiled.

Fifty yards away, Gig Warner, babbling, dropped to the ground and nestled his cheek into the dune, feeling a sense of peace.

Then John Carey, still smiling, sank to his knees and began toying idly with the sand.

They were the first men on the planet Mars. And they were mad.

Major Kevin Chumm had a reputation for bluntness, and it preceded him even into the antiseptic halls of the Rickover Military Hospital. There was a wariness about the hospital officials who greeted him; many were surprised to find that he was such a personable young man. One of the Army nurses did a bit of casual flirting, and got a taste of Major Chumm's temper.

"Never mind the fun and games," he said testily. "Just take me to Captain Warner."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, Major." The nurse, flustered, patted the curls under her cap. "Our orders are positive. Neither Captain Warner or Captain Carey are permitted visitors."

"I'm superseding your orders," Kevin snapped. "Now will you show me Captain Warner's room, or do I have to get nasty?"

The nurse looked bewildered. A passing official caught her unspoken plea for help, and paused. After a few minutes conversation, he succumbed either to Major Chumm's blunt charm, or his air of authority.

"All right, nurse," he said. "Major Chumm can see Captain Warner, but only for a few minutes."

"Thanks," Kevin said gruffly.

He followed the nurse down the hall, a lanky figure in the heavy boots of the space command, his brooding eyes fixed on the polished floor. When he entered the room in the hospital's psychiatric wing, he heard the click of the lock behind him.

Captain Gig Warner was in a wheel chair, looking out of a barred window. He wore a hospital bathrobe.

"Gig," Kevin said softly.

Warner didn't turn around.

"Gig, it's me. What did they do to you?"

Kevin stepped closer. He

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The crazed woman aimed well. Areesa crumpled to the ground.

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touched the captain's shoulder, but felt no response.

"What did you see up there, Gig? What happened to you and Johnny?"

"The light, the light, the light," Warner mumbled. "My name is Gig Warner, space command. Beautiful, beautiful . . ."

Major Chumm winced.

"It's all right, Gig. Everything's going to be okay now. We're going to take care of you."

"Johnny . . . Johnny . . . do you see? Beautiful, beautiful . . ."

"Easy, Gig."

"Beautiful," Warner giggled. "So beautiful, Johnny . . ."

Kevin turned his face away. Then he walked to the door, and hammered on the window panel until it was unlocked.

In the offices of Dr. Kris Borenson, chief of the psychiatric division, Major Chumm asked:

"What's the prognosis, Doctor?"

Borenson sighed.

"At first, we believed both men suffered some traumatic shock. We tried to bring them back to reality, with shock treatments of our own, but they've failed utterly. We're forced to face the fact that their sanity has been totally destroyed; there isn't even a shred of rationality left. We're dealing with something beyond our earthly experience now, Major; it's like no psychosis we have ever encountered . . ."

"But what about the second Mars ship? The men who found Walker and Carey? Nothing happened to them."

"No, nothing. We can't explain that, either."

"These things he keeps saying. Does it mean anything to you?"

"Nothing whatever. Both men repeat the same absurdities, over and over. Whatever they saw, whatever they felt, it was an experience involving something they call "beautiful." He grunted. "It's a high price to pay for beauty, Major."

"Too high," Kevin said gloomily.

The gloominess stayed with Kevin Chumm when he left Rickover Hospital and returned to BOQ at the space command field in Pawling. But it was more than the plight of his fellow officers that was troubling him—it was guilt. A year ago, he had been one of the dozen men who had trained rigorously for the two-man trip to Mars, an assignment coveted by every member of the space command. One by one, the eliminations had taken place, until the choice had narrowed down to Gig Warner, John Carey, and himself. It had seemed like a foregone conclusion that Major Chumm would be elected: his keenness of mind, his physical vigor, his intensity of spirit had made him the most likely candidate for the job. There was a gambler's pool in the barracks of the command post, and the odds had it all in favor of Kevin Chumm, with John Carey a close second.

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Then the accident happened. It was stupid; it was unforgiveable; it was bitter disappointment. A routine space flight between Earth and the Moon, piloted by Major Chumm; a moment of recklessness that cost the ship its landing equipment; a brilliant but damaging landing on a makeshift runway; a broken arm that never knit in time for the scheduled rendezvous with the red planet.

Kevin hated himself every time he thought of it. *He* should have co-piloted that first Mars ship. *He* should have put his boots on the sands of Mars, not Gig Warner. And *he* should have been the hollow-eyed figure in the wheel chair by the barred window of the Rickover Hospital . . .

Kevin felt guilty. But being human, he felt relieved, too. And the relief made him hate himself all the more.

"I'll find out, Gig," he whispered to himself. "I'll find out what they did to you . . ."

In five months, the third Mars expedition would be preparing to explore the planet. And Major Kevin Chumm, his arm healed and usable, would be in command.

But something else intervened; something more unexpected than a broken bone.

Three weeks before the date of rendezvous with Mars, the first interstellar message was received on Earth.

At first, it seemed to be nothing more than a wild rumor which spread from city to nation to continent. There were vigorous denials from the major world capitals; there was a blanket of secrecy which dropped heavily over all facts. The hope of finding intelligence within the scope of Earth had long since been abandoned by science. They had searched the Moon, and found nothing but silent rock. They had visited Mars, and seen nothing but sand and copper hills. Their telescopes, freed from the distortion of Earth's atmosphere, had scanned the terrains of Mercury and Venus, and found no sign of living things. They had been convinced that Earth was the only source of life in the solar system and beyond, and that Man would be forever alone in the cosmos.

But now the rumors were spreading—rumors of a voice heard in the great radio receivers of the space command, of signals from another star, another race.

Major Kevin Chumm was one of the first to learn that the rumors were true.

Along with a dozen other officers of the command, he was called into emergency session. In a briefing room, General Curtis Van Damme himself took the lectern.

"Gentlemen," he said. "The stories are genuine. We *have* been contacted from outer space."

It took a long moment to silence the buzzing assembly.

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"We're as amazed and bewildered as you are now. We've checked and double-checked, and there seems to be no doubt that the contact is real. The basic fact is startling in itself, but the details are perhaps even more baffling. Whatever entity has managed to reach our receivers from their inhabited system, has also managed to learn a great deal about us. For one thing, the contact was made in the English language."

He held up his hand, trying to still their astonished reaction.

"It's been established that the contact came from the Antares system, from a planet which has been designated as Coltura. We have been unable to answer the signal and get our own message back, but that will not be necessary. The contact has informed us that a space vehicle is now on its way from Antares, and will be arriving here within the month." (There was no need to still them now; the response was one of silent astonishment.) "From what we understand of the messages received—all of which have been recorded on tape and will be played for you here—the space vessel is a photon-powered starship, of the type we ourselves have been attempting to design for the past eleven years. Presumably, it will complete the journey from Coltura to Earth in a period no longer than a few weeks—an accomplishment of some magnitude, as I'm sure you all realize. This event, as you might suppose, supercedes any prior commitments of the space command, including the forthcoming third Martian expedition. Detailed assignments concerning the landing of the Coltura vessels will be made within the week. For the time being, that's all I can say."

There were excited questions hurled at General Van Damme as he concluded, but he waved them off. Then, after the equipment had been readied, the group of high-ranking officers listened in awed silence to the taped messages received from another world, in another system.

The static was heavy, but the thin, high voice of the otherworld being penetrated the crackle, emerging sharp and clear. Despite its eerie quality, it spoke matter-of-factly, describing its position in the universe, providing astronomical data in painstaking detail. Then the voice announced the intention of sending a delegate to the planet Earth, and carefully described the navigational path the photon-powered starship would take on its Earthbound mission.

The tape was of short duration. But when the last sound was heard in the briefing room, its effect had been powerful.

"From another world," Kevin Chumm said aloud. "It's incredible . . ."

"I still don't believe it," Colonel Firestone, a grizzled officer who had taken part in the first Moon landing twenty years before, set his jaw grimly. "The

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whole thing's some kind of damned hoax."

"But if they've authenticated the broadcasts—"

"Nonsense. They've just authenticated the cleverness of the imposter, that's all. Did you hear that voice? Perfect English! That's too much to believe. And another thing—" He snorted.

"What other thing?" Kevin said.

"That voice. It was a woman, of course."

"A woman?"

"I know a woman's voice when I hear it. Our alien's a woman; that's how it sounded to me. And I think that's stretching the joke a little too far."

But when the meeting broke up, Major Kevin Chumm wasn't only concerned with the truth or falsehood of the message from space. For the second time, he had been cheated out of his Mars journey, and this new twist of circumstance filled him with bitter resentment.

Thirty-four days later, the New Yerkes Observatory on the Moon reported the approach of a rapidly-moving object in space, an object whose flight path would bring it into Earth's orbital range within a matter of hours. If there had been any doubt left concerning the validity of the alien broadcast, it was dispelled as the object neared landfall. As it loomed larger in the telescopes, it became clear that the thing was a space vessel, moving with a speed beyond the capability of Earth technology. All attempts at making radio contact with the photon ship failed, but the curious and excited officials of the space command had only a short time to wait. In the desert of Alamagordo, the starship made its descent, and just as quickly, was surrounded by a ring of protective security that concealed its passenger and purpose from the rest of the world.

Major Kevin Chumm was as eagerly curious as the rest of the space command to learn what secret the starship held. But he learned sooner than he expected. On the second day after the Landing, a top priority requisition arrived at space command headquarters in Pawling, ordering Major Chumm to report immediately to Alamagordo.

He knew that his requisition went beyond ordinary military exigency the moment he arrived at the field. He was treated too deferentially; too much like a visiting congressman. A special copter was put at his command to bring him to central headquarters, and the curious looks he got from the field personnel made it plain that his presence had some unusual significance.

He was shown directly into General Van Damme's quarters, and the general himself rose to greet him.

Kevin threw a crisp salute, and said:

"Pardon me, sir. But this reception—"

"I know," the general chuck-

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led. "We didn't intend to unnerve you, Major. But you've suddenly become a VIP around here; you'll understand when I tell you what has happened."

He sat down and offered the major a cigarette.

"Ah you know," Van Damme said, "the photon-ship landed here barely forty-eight hours ago; most incredible piece of construction I've seen. It carried only one passenger, and the occupant was perhaps more incredible than the ship. Oh, we expected anything to step out of the airlock — some Wellsian nightmare, some twenty-legged spider, God knows what. But we were wrong, Major; I'm happy to tell you that. The creature from the planet Coltura is completely humanoid—to put it mildly. It speaks our language fluently, and we've been conversing at length since the arrival. And then the creature made a request—for an aide-de-camp, or chaperone, or whatever you want to call it."

He paused, and looked at Kevin with strange glassy eyes.

"The creature asked for you, Major Chumm. By name."

Kevin's jaw dropped.

"By *name?* You must be joking."

"I'm deadly serious, Major. I can't explain how a creature a billion miles removed from Earth could know so much about our affairs. The request raised cries of "hoax" all over again, but there's no question of that. The creature is genuine. We've examined the ship, and know that only a greater and alien intelligence could have constructed it, employing alloys and techniques that are far beyond us. It's *real,* Major." He clenched his fists on the desk.

It was only then that Kevin realized how much strain the general was under.

"But why should it ask for *me?* That doesn't make sense—"

"Nothing makes sense," Van Damme said hollowly. "Least of all, the creature itself. But I'll let you see that for yourself."

He stood up, and gestured Kevin towards the doorway. The major followed him down the long corridor to an elevator. It descended to the sub-basement of the Army building, and into a bare room filled with buzzing subalterns. They fell silent at their approach, and their speculative stares were directed at Kevin Chumm.

"This way," the general said, opening the door to an inner office.

Kevin stepped inside.

The creature from the starship was seated in an armchair beside the window. It rose when the officers entered.

Colonel Firestone had been right. The being from Coltura, whose broadcasts to Earth had fired the imagination of the world, whose incredible photon-powered ship had baffled the intelligences of Earth's finest scientists, was a woman.

And what a woman! Kevin Chumm stared at her incredu-

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lously, stunned by a vision of such uncanny beauty that he forgot all else at the sight of her. It didn't matter that she was an alien being, the first non-human ever to come within man's ken; it didn't matter that she had come from another world, in a star system countless miles from Earth. She was a woman, lovelier than any he had dreamed existed—long, cascading blonde hair that gleamed with pure-gold highlights, deep, enveloping violet eyes filled with tenderness and compassion, a mouth painfully beautiful, a complexion so flawless, a body so perfect that the simple white robes couldn't conceal an inch of her perfection. She was beautiful, beautiful . . .

He struggled out of his sudden trance, and tried to comprehend what the general was saying.

"This is Major Chumm, Areesa. The officer you wanted to see . . ."

She smiled, heightening the incandescent loveliness of her face.

"I'm happy to meet you, Major Chumm." Her voice was soft and lyrical. "I hope you will forgive my intrusion upon your duties. But this experience is so strange and bewildering to me, I thought it would be best if some officer were permanently assigned to school me in your Earth ways . . ."

Kevin tried to answer, but no words came.

"You're released of all other commitments, Major," Van Damme said brusquely. "You're to accompany Areesa wherever she wishes to go, and to assist her in every possible way. Now I'll leave you two to get better acquainted."

He turned and left. Kevin watched him go out, in a state close to panic, and then slowly faced the blonde from space.

She was smiling.

"You are confused," she said softly. "You are concerned. But you needn't be, Major. As you can see, I'm quite like the women of your world. I look like them, and talk like them, and, I believe, feel like them. I am not a "creature" as your general seems to think. I am a member of another evolutionary species, but one whose kinship with your own should be readily apparent."

Kevin was finding his voice.

"How—how did you know me? Why did you ask for me?"

She laughed. "Is it really so mysterious? I have already told your inquisitors over and over. This voyage was planned for many years, Major; it was no sudden whim. Before we embarked upon it, we felt it was necessary to learn as much as we could about the affairs of your world."

"You were watching us? From Coltura?"

She chuckled softly. "In our own way, Major. In our own way. We have watched with interest your attempts to expand beyond the boundaries of your planet; it was interesting to see

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you encounter the same obstacles and heartbreaks and triumphs we ourselves faced, many thousands of years ago. We knew it would not be long before you had the means for interstellar voyages, and we thought it best that we share our knowledge with you. The photon ship which brought me here will be of incalculable value to your scientists; it will further their progress greatly. That, I believe, is reason enough to be grateful for my visit."

"I—I still don't understand. Are all Colturans—women?"

She laughed again, a silvery trill.

"No, Major Chumm. Our sexes are like yours, male and female. But there the similarity ends, because on our world, the women participate on a wholly equal basis with the Colturan males in the affairs of science, art, and government."

"But you still haven't answered the important question. Why did you ask for *me?*"

"Because we knew you to be an intelligent, accomplished young man, Major. Surely that explanation should suffice? Of all the two billion men on Earth, weren't *you* chosen for the first exploration of Mars?"

"But I never got there," Kevin said bitterly.

"That was unfortunate. But nevertheless, Major, you're the man I believed would help me most. And as long as you've been commanded to be my aide—won't you make the best of it?"

She came closer to him. The nearness of so much overwhelming beauty was almost too much for Kevin to bear.

"All right," he said, swallowing hard. "It's my pleasure to be of service, Miss—"

"My name is Areesa," the woman said.

Major Chumm had learned to expect almost anything from his service in the space command; his duties had required him to fulfill many missions which were not detailed in the standard manuals of the service. But never before had an assignment like this one come along.

At first, he was pleased and somewhat flattered at the responsibility. Always publicity-shy, he began to learn to tolerate the flash of camera lights and the eager questions of newsmen. He began to move in select circles which encompassed high government officials, foreign dignitaries, prominent scientists; he became a combination companion, bodyguard, interpreter, and personal secretary to the stunningly beautiful woman who had come from outer space to stagger the imagination of all the populated world. At first, he enjoyed listening to her detailed accounts of life on the planet Coltura, a life which seemed to surpass Earth in its peace and wisdom and learning. He liked to hear of Coltura's dedication to science and art and the humanities. He liked picturing a world so much greener and fairer than the one

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he knew, a world so close to the ideal that all who listened to Areesa's words felt envy and regret that Earth had not yet attained such perfection.

But after six months of being Areesa's aide, the task became something else. He didn't know what it was that troubled him so, that made his nights sleepless, and his days filled with unnamed anxiety.

One morning, alone with Areesa, she said:

"What is it, Major? What's bothering you?"

"Nothing at all. Why?"

"You cannot hide your feelings from me, Major. I have learned to know your moods in these few months. Something is troubling you. Could it be this assignment? Are you tired of it?"

He scowled. "It's just not the sort of thing I'm used to, Areesa. I'm a space pilot; that's my job. I should be manning a ship, not—"

She turned her face away, and a sharp pang struck him. He touched her shoulder, and then took his hand away quickly.

"Why do you fear me, Major?" Areesa whispered.

"It's got nothing to do with you," he said tightly. "Nothing at all. But I'm going to ask General Van Damme to release me, Areesa. I've got to do it."

She said nothing.

The next day, he sought an audience with the space command chief.

"I don't understand," the general told him. "You know the importance of this duty, Major."

"Perhaps. But it's not the way I can serve best, General. You know that. What about the Third Martian Expedition? Is that going to be held up indefinitely?"

"We're making plans for it, Major."

"But the plans don't include me, do they? I'm too vital for this *other* job, aren't I? Playing nursemaid to our blonde from space—"

The general chewed his lip thoughtfully. "You never seem unhappy to be with her, Major. I rather thought you were getting —fond of Areesa."

"That's got nothing to do with it." Kevin flushed.

"Maybe it has. Maybe you don't want to admit it, Major, even to yourself. But I've seen you with her, and I'm not blind. I may not be a young buck like you, Major Chumm, but I remember what it was like to be so crazy about a woman that you couldn't bear to be with her or without her—"

"That's not true!" Kevin said angrily. "That's not the reason—"

"Isn't it, Major?'

Kevin sat down, slowly, suddenly confronted with a truth he had refused to acknowledge. The general's words had brought him face to face with the fact—he was beginning to feel much too strongly for the beautiful woman who had come into his life from the other end of the universe.

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"All right," he said dully "I can't tell you all my reasons, General. But I'm asking you to relieve me."

"I'm sorry," Van Damme answered softly. "You have your orders, Major Chumm. You'll continue to carry them out."

Dr. Kris Borenson, chief psychiatrist of the Rickover Military Hospital, was a hard man to reach. For three weeks, Kevin tried to contact him without success, tried to learn if there had been any progress in the recovery of Captains Warner and Carey. But Borenson was too busy, occupied with more urgent matters, and Kevin didn't learn what they were until he visited the psychiatrist at his own home.

"I'm sorry to bother you here," he said curtly. "But it's been impossible to reach you at the hospital—"

"It's all right," Borenson said wearily. "Come in, Major. I know you're anxious to hear news of your friends, but the way things have been going—"

"What do you mean? What's been happening?"

"Nothing, as far as Captain Warner and Captain Carey are concerned. Their condition is unchanged. But my problem has not been them—it's been the hundreds of new cases which have been appearing these last few months."

"New cases?"

"The law of averages has gone wild," Borenson scowled. He was a jovial-faced man with ruddy cheeks, but now he looked dark and brooding. "The number of shock chases has more than quadrupled recently—the hospital wards are filling with mental cases as hopeless as your friends'. I can't understand it — nobody can."

"I haven't heard about it—"

"No, no," Borenson frowned. "We haven't been seeking publicity in the matter. But the truth is, psychiatric centers all over the country have experienced the same phenomenon. Oh, perhaps it's not of epidemic proportion yet—perhaps the total of new cases won't exceed three or four thousand—but it's so much beyond the average that we're profoundly disturbed. And the most baffling aspect is the *nature* of the psychoses. The new victims are totally deranged, beyond the reach of customary drug or shock treatments."

"But why is it happening? Don't you have any idea?"

"No, not really. Oh, there are theories. The most popular one at the moment—not one I share—is that times of stress produce an unusual crop of such debilities. What with all this space exploration, the arrival of another-world being—some psychiatrists conclude that these events have triggered something in man's subconscious, something which produces madness. But I am not satisfied with this opinion."

Kevin watched him thoughtfully.

"You mention the other-world being—Areesa. You think her ar-

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rival could have anything to do with this?"

"No, Major. The evidence is against any kind of alien contagion. For one thing, none of the new patients, to my knowledge, has been near this space-woman. Nor have those close to her fallen victim to this new malady. Surely you can see that rules out the possibility of any organic disease?"

"Yes," Kevin said. "Yes, I guess so . . ."

Borenson sighed. "We'll just have to watch and wait. Perhaps the cycle has worn itself out. Perhaps the law of averages will come to our rescue at last. Until then, I expect to be a very busy man . . ."

It was two days later that Areesa, the blonde from space, was killed by a jealous woman.

They were in the National Art Galleries in Washington, D. C., when it happened. Kevin was conducting the tour personally, without benefit of the museum guides who had eagerly offered their services to this distinguished visitor. But Areesa didn't seem to require guidance; she knew an extraordinary amount about the paintings and the artists who created them. Kevin didn't wonder at her knowledge; he had become accustomed to the surprising facets of the woman from the planet Coltura. She knew a great deal about most things.

As they left the galleries, walking slowly down the wide marble steps leading to the street, a curious crowd watched them.

Neither saw the crazed eyes of the woman who was pushing forward in the throng. Neither saw the weapon in her hand, or the obvious intent in her expression. Before a single cry of warning could be heard, the woman was in front of them, the revolver raised, shouting words of vengeance.

Then she fired four times. Areesa, gasping, her beautiful violet eyes turning for one last, inquiring look at Kevin Chumm's face, crumpled to the steps and lay still.

He bent over her, and touched the blood that was soiling her dress.

Her heart had stopped beating, and the lovely eyes had been closed forever.

Later, they learned the meaning of the mad performance on the museum steps. The woman, Mrs. Theda Chasen of Chicago, told the police her story. She accused Areesa of stealing the affection of her husband, Philip Chasen. It was an act of insanity, of course. Areesa had never known or seen a man called Philip Chasen. The woman was examined at length by a psychiatric board, and declared not mentally responsible for her action. She was confined to an institution.

But the reason for Areesa's death was of no concern to Kevin Chumm. All he cared about was the fact that she was gone—that

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the woman he had loved desperately was dead.

The world felt the loss, too, but in a totally different manner. The governments of Earth grieved over the loss of their one delegate from an important and advanced civilization; the scientists mourned the loss of their one link to the stars. The press felt the loss of the century's most sensational news story. The public felt the loss only briefly, as if Areesa had been a favored toy that had regretably broken, and needed to be discarded. They soon forgot her.

Yet Kevin Chumm's loss was the hardest of all to bear. And because of it, he decided to resign his commission in the space command.

General Van Damme tried to talk him out of it.

"This is crazy, Major, you must realize that. You haven't failed in your duty in any way; you couldn't have prevented that madwoman from doing what she did."

"I don't know if I could or couldn't, General. But the fact is, I did. And now I want to crawl into a hole and forget things for a while—"

"That won't do any good, Major. You know that."

"I'm within my rights, General Van Damme—"

"It's not a question of rights, Major! I'm thinking of your own good, and of the command. I know what's really bothering you. You got too fond of Areesa, and now her death has thrown you for a loop. But running away isn't the answer, believe me."

"I'm sorry, General."

The officer made a weary gesture.

"All right, Major. You know your own mind. I'll process your resignation in due course."

Two months later, Kevin Chumm was signing his name as "Mister" to an apartment house lease. For two months after that, he lived a solitary existence, sharing it only with the comforts of tasteless meals and even worse-tasting whiskey. He knew that what he was doing was wrong and harmful; that he was being goaded by a force new to him. It would have taken a psychiatrist to recognize the drive for self-destruction that had appeared in Kevin Chumm's psyche.

Then a doctor did.

It began with a letter, on the stationery of the Rickover Military Hospital.

Dear Major Chumm,

I have been trying to contact you for the past month, without success. Fortunately, a friend of yours at the command post in Pawling was able to give me your address. Something has occurred which I think you should be aware of, regarding the case of Theda Chasen, the woman who assassinated the spacewoman, Areesa. I first learned of it through a colleague at the Psychiatric Association, and knew immediately that you would be interested. If you could contact

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me at the hospital, I would be happy to oblige with details.

It was signed in the scrawling, nearly-illegible handwriting of Dr. Kris Borenson.

Kevin re-read the letter. His first reaction was to throw it away; he wasn't anxious for reminders of Areesa and her tragic fate. Then curiosity overcame his reluctance.

He telephoned Borenson at the hospital.

"I'm glad you called," the doctor said simply. "I think you will find this interesting, Major Chumm—"

"Mister Chumm," Kevin said.

"When can we get together? I'd like you to meet this person—"

"What person?"

"It's Mrs. Chasen's sister, Margaret. Her story is rather incredible, but I think you should hear it. Could you possibly meet with us tonight?"

Kevin hesitated.

"All right," he said. "We can meet in my apartment. But can't you tell me what this is all about?"

"I think it would be better if you heard it yourself."

He spent a nervous afternoon and evening awaiting the arrival of Dr. Borenson and the woman. When they finally arrived at eight, he showed them into the disordered flat, and looked closely at the sister of the woman who had killed the blonde from space.

She was a woman in her early forties, with irregular features; there was something of the eternal spinster about her. She was trying hard to appear calm, but it was obvious that a volcano rumbled inside the severe lines of her body. She refused a drink, and waited until Dr. Borenson, gently coaxing, asked her to tell her story.

"I—I don't know where to begin. I know it sounds strange, but—" She looked at Kevin hopefully. "My sister isn't crazy, Mr. Chumm. Not completely."

Kevin turned away, frowning.

"Believe me, it's true! Oh, I know it was a terrible thing she did. I guess you could call it a kind of temporary insanity. But she wasn't having any delusions about her husband, I know she wasn't. Because—because I was the one who told her."

"I don't understand," Kevin said quietly.

"It *was* that woman," she said passionately. "That woman who was supposed to have come from another planet. I *know* it was her."

"What do you mean?"

"You'd better tell it from the beginning," Borenson said.

"All right. I—I was very fond of my sister. When she married Phil Chasen, I wasn't too happy about it. He was kind of wild, one of these handsome types that are used to have women fuss over them. My sister was crazy about him, so crazy that she wouldn't listen when I warned her about him . . ."

"Go on," Borenson prompted.

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"Anyway, they were married. Then, a few months ago, he started acting funny. Busy at the office all the time, that sort of thing. Of course, Theda didn't think anything was wrong; she was a trusting type, if you know what I mean. But I began to get suspicious, and I—I decided to find out what he was up to." She stiffened, defiantly. "So I began to follow him at night. I watched him leave his office, the usual time, of course, and go someplace downtown. And I was right, of course. There *was* another woman. He met her in some fancy cocktail lounge. She was wearing all black, and wore some kind of veil thing, but I knew who she was, all right. It was *her*, that *space* hussy!"

She looked at Kevin triumphantly.

He shook his head. "And how do you *know* it was?"

"Because I *saw* her, didn't I? I saw her with my own eyes. Oh, she's a pretty famous face, all right. You could hardly miss seeing it anywhere. Kind of good-looking, I suppose, if you like the type. I knew it was her the minute I saw her."

Kevin looked at Borenson, with raised eyebrows. But the doctor merely nodded gravely.

"Well, you can imagine how I felt. Not only was Phil Chasen *cheating* on Theda, but with that *creature* of all things. I was so shocked I could have died. I told Theda about it, naturally, and at first she didn't believe me either. I offered to take her along on one of my—well, anyway, she refused. So I did the next best thing. I hired a man."

"What kind of man?"

"A private detective," the woman said smugly. "A real smart gentleman, named Holden O'Brien. And *he* got the goods on that Phil Chasen, all right! There was no question about it."

"Show it to him," Dr. Borenson said.

The woman reached into her large, flat purse. She removed a glossy photograph, and handed it to Kevin.

"There, Mr. Chumm. Now you look at that, and *then* say I'm crazy."

Kevin looked.

It wasn't a very good picture. It had been taken by an instantaneous-print camera, and the subjects had obviously been moving. But the faces were still clear and unmistakeable—the face of Philip Chasen, and the face of Areesa, the blonde from space, now a mouldering corpse in Arlington Cemetery.

"It—it can't be," Kevin said. "It's not possible—"

"Nobody else looks like *that*," the woman said shrilly. "Nobody *could* look like that—"

He knew it was true. He looked at the photo again, and denied what he knew to be true.

"It's impossible! Areesa never knew this Philip Chasen. She never left my sight, not for all the time she was on Earth. She couldn't have carried on this—cheap affair."

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He looked wildly towards Borenson, who shrugged.

"I can't explain it either, Mr. Chumm. And yet there it is. Could it have been at all possible—"

"No! No!" Kevin Chumm shouted, getting to his feet. "The whole thing's a lie! This isn't Areesa — Areesa would never have *looked* at this man—"

Borenson's brow furrowed. "I think you take this too personally, Mr. Chumm—"

"Get out of here!" Kevin cried, waving his arms menacingly. "Get out!"

The woman rose quickly, her eyes frightened. The doctor nodded at her, and steered her towards the door.

"Get out and stay out! Keep your filthy lies to yourself! *Get out!*"

He slammed the door after them. When he returned, raging, he saw that the photograph was still lying on the sofa. He tore it into tiny shreds, and flung it into the cold fireplace.

But he couldn't shred it fine enough. The image of the photograph remained in his mind for the rest of the week, and he knew he would have to satisfy the nagging doubt it left behind.

In the telephone directory, he found only one Holden O'Brien in the listings, and memorized the designation beside it: *Confidential Investigations,* 210 South Street.

Kevin had his mind made up about Holden O'Brien even before he opened the frosted glass door of his office. He saw him as a squat, narrow-eyed man with a dead cigar between his lips, caring only for the contents of his client's wallet. But on the other side of the business-like desk, he found a man younger than himself, with close-cropped blond hair, black-rimmed spectacles, and the alert look of a college athlete. He was altogether too wholesome for the atmosphere, and Kevin's face registered his surprise.

"Yes, I'm O'Brien," the young man grinned, before Kevin asked the question. "You're Major Chumm, aren't you?"

"You know who I am?"

"You're the Sunday supplements' pet, Major. Didn't you know? What can I do for you?"

Kevin sat down and told him, hesitantly. There was a large part of the story that Holden O'Brien seemed already aware of. When he reached the description of Dr. Borenson's visit, the investigator said:

"So that's it. She's still convinced of that crazy idea of hers—"

Kevin gripped the arms of the chair. "Then you don't believe it either?"

"Of course not. I didn't realize my client still believed the girl was Areesa, or else I would have straightened her out before she made a fool of herself."

"You'll have to admit—the resemblance—"

"Oh, there's a resemblance, all right. An uncanny one. But I can

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prove the girl isn't Areesa, Major, prove it without question." He smiled, self-satisfied.

"How?"

"Easiest way in the world. The photo was taken about a month before Areesa was killed. And there's no doubt that the—spacewoman's dead and buried. Is there?"

"No. No doubt."

The young detective spread his hands. "So there you are. The girl in the photo is very much alive."

A wave of relief spread over Kevin like a healing balm.

"Alive? You're sure?"

"Couldn't be surer." A slight flush tinted his cheek. "Tell you the truth, I got more than a little involved with her as a result of that assignment. We sort of got acquainted; I saw her only two nights ago. Her name is Alice Spencer, and she's a first reader for a book publishing company. She's out of this world, all right, Major, but not the way you mean."

"You actually know this woman?"

"I sure do." He looked happy when he said it. "She's nothing at all like Theda Chasen's sister thinks. She never knew that Phil Chasen was married—he had a habit of neglecting to mention that littfe fact. She dropped him like a hot rock when she found out."

"Could you show her to me? Could I meet her?"

O'Brien looked at him speculatively.

"Well, I dunno . . ."

"Please, Mr. O'Brien. It means a lot to me."

"Okay. If it'll really help you, Major." He reached for the telephone. "But remember, pal—she is *my* girl."

"Thank you," Kevin whispered, and watched the detective dial the number.

They arranged to meet that night at eight, in a restaurant called Denton's. Kevin was prompt, but when the moment actually came, he lingered at the bar and fortified himself with two stiff bolts of whiskey. Then he asked the headwaiter to show him to the table reserved by Holden O'Brien.

He followed the maitre d' slowly as he threaded his way between the snowy tablecloths. He didn't even see O'Brien rising to greet him; his eyes were only for the girl that was seated in the opposite chair. He wasn't the only man in the dining room whose eyes were upon her; her radiance created an aura that caught and held male attention like a magnet. She was beautiful.

But she wasn't Areesa.

Distantly, he heard Holden O'Brien introduce him. His gaze rested on the girl's face, and he marveled at the astonishing resemblance to the dead blonde from space. There was relief in his look, too. For all her loveliness, there was none of Areesa's unearthly magic about this girl. Her blonde hair didn't cascade; it was carefully cut and combed

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in contemporary fashion. Her eyes weren't violet; they were blue, and with a glint of humor. Her complexion was strikingly flawless, but he could still detect the artful makeup that contributed to its perfection. Alice Spencer was definitely of this world.

"Holden's told me all about it," she said softly when they were seated. "It's not the first time I've been mistaken for . . . her . . ."

"It's an amazing resemblance," Kevin said. "But now that I see you . . ."

"Well, you should know better than anyone." Her voice was warm; he liked the frank way she looked at him. "You were probably closer to her than anyone on Earth. Was she really as remarkable as they say?"

"Yes. Remarkable," Kevin Chumm said.

Holden O'Brien looked uncomfortable. "Well, what you say to a drink, folks? This being a sort of occasion—"

"Nothing for me," Kevin said, suddenly not wanting the stimulation of alcohol. He watched Alice Spencer's face, as if her own answer would be significant. She said:

"No, thanks, Holden. I don't think I'll have a drink, either."

It was clear to all of them what was happening, but they went on talking about ordinary things. Like chemicals which had found affinity, Kevin Chumm and Alice Spencer sat and looked at each other as if their acquaintanceship had been one of long years instead of minutes. Vainly, Holden O'Brien tried to prevent the inevitable from happening; but he was helpless to do anything but remain an innocent bystander.

They were having coffee at the end of the meal when they heard the commotion on the other side of the restaurant. At first, it seemed like nothing more than a waiter's mishap; dishes shattered loudly on the floor. Then they heard the shriek of women, and saw the man in the dark blue suit staggering between the tables in a wild, senseless dance, his eyes blank and staring, his mouth slack. Another man, his face pained and baffled, chased after him, but too late to stop the senseless rigadoon. The man in the blue suit began to shout, and then fell forward, writhing as if in torment. The waiters rushed to him, one of them muttering about drunks, but it was clear that the man in the blue suit was suffering something deadlier than alcoholism. They picked him up, and when Kevin saw the man's distorted face, the sightless eyes, the lips muttering gibberish, he knew he was witnessing the onset of madness.

A few minutes later, the room was quiet again; it was as if nothing had happened.

"How terrible!" Alice Spencer said, only then discovering that she had clutched Kevin's arm during the outburst. "That poor man . . ."

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"Third time I've seen something like that this month," Holden O'Brien said. "Seems like people are going nuts all over town . . ."

Kevin thought of Borenson.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

The next day, not even feeling guilt over appropriating Holden O'Brien's girlfriend, he telephoned Alice Spencer, and made a date for the evening.

Then, acting upon an impulse he didn't fully understand, he called Dr. Borenson. He expected that the psychiatrist would be relieved at the explanation of the mystery, that they would share a laugh over the mistaken identity. But Borenson didn't sound relieved; he sounded troubled.

"What's wrong, Doctor?"

"It's the same problem, Major Chumm; the same problem grown a hundred times worse . . ."

"You mean the psychos?" Kevin said. "I've been thinking about that myself. Last night, in a restaurant . . ."

The doctor interrupted. "Almost twelve thousand new cases in two months," he said. "It's unbelievable. We can no longer consider it a coincidence—nor can we hide the facts from the public. It's an epidemic of some sort, some kind of pathological epidemic. And the pattern is so strange . . ."

"How do you mean?"

"The victims are all men. Young men, too; none of them over fifty. And so many of them are—important people. Men of standing and intelligence: doctors, scientists, scholars . . . it's terrible to contemplate what would happen if the contagion continues to spread . . ."

Kevin said something sympathetic. The news was disturbing, but somehow, he wasn't as affected as he should have been. For the first time in months, he felt a sense of optimism. The thought of seeing Alice Spencer that night was more important to him than all the psychotics in the world . . .

They went to an outdoor concert, and held hands from the beginning of the music to the last trailing note. Then they walked and talked, discovering their mutual likes and dislikes, and delighting in every new revelation.

They were together the following night, and the night after that. And then there was an understanding that no more nights would pass without their being together.

It was the happiest time of Kevin Chumm's life; so happy that he was blissfully unaware of the news stories that were blanketing the country with near-hysterical reports of a mysterious mental ailment that was sweeping the world. He was only vaguely aware that people were talking of nothing else, that the epidemic had reached terrifying proportions, that the hospital wards were filled to overflow with raving, mindless young men . . .

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It was Holden O'Brien who brought him to the sharp realization of the catastrophe that was striking the Earth. The youthful investigator had accepted the loss of Alice Spencer's fond affection grudgingly, and Kevin had remained his friend. One day, he became something more. He became his ally.

O'Brien had asked him to call at the detective's office, with the promise of "something interesting." Kevin showed up at three in the afternoon, and found O'Brien surrounded by stacks of graphs and charts. It looked more like an accounting office than the quarters of a private eye, and Kevin chuckled.

"What's all this stuff for? Going into Wall Street?"

O'Brien didn't return the smile.

"Maybe something more important," he said, with a curious note of grimness. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about this loony epidemic that's got everybody so scared. Ever since I saw that guy go off his rocker in the restaurant—"

"I think these stories are exaggerated," Kevin said. "Mental illness isn't contagious. I think the public is being unnecessarily alarmed."

O'Brien frowned. "Take off the rose-colored glasses, Major. Ever since you met Alice, you've been walking around in a pink fog. I tell you this thing is serious; for all we know, either one of us could be the next victim."

"Okay. So what's all the charts for?"

O'Brien picked up a handful and slammed it to the desk. "I've been trying to trace a pattern," he said. "Maybe other people are doing the same thing, but maybe they haven't come to the same conclusions I have. It was hard to spot, at first—there didn't seem to be any common denominators in the ailment, except for the fact that all the loonies were men under fifty, and a large number of them were intelligent types. But that could be accounted for in other ways—too much cerebration, overworked minds, that kind of thing. But there's something else I've found, and I thought you might want to hear about it."

"Sure," Kevin said. "Let's hear it."

O'Brien leaned back in his chair and counted on his fingers.

"Fact one," he said. "There have been *no* victims of the ailment in certain areas of the world. The space command outpost on the Moon has had no cases. Certain other Army installations have reported no loonies."

"What does that prove?"

"I'm not sure. But it leads us to fact two. *Where there are no women—there are no loonies.*"

O'Brien looked dead serious, but Kevin couldn't help laughing.

"What's your point? That it's some kind of social disease? Or that it's the women that are driving men nuts—as usual?"

"I don't know *what* it means, Kev. But that's the fact. In iso-

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lated army outposts, in prisons and penitentiaries, in all those places where the population is all-male—there are no victims of the illness. That can't be just a coincidence, can it?"

"And is this what all the charts and graphs are about?"

"Yes. Don't you think it's important?"

Kevin smiled. "I really would not know, pal. Guess I'm just not a statistician; I couldn't tell you if it makes sense or not."

"You couldn't tell me *anything* now," the detective said gloomily. "All you've got on your mind is Alice . . ."

"You're not sore, Holden? About Alice, I mean?"

"Who, me?" O'Brien smiled for the first time that afternoon. "Sure, I'm hurt. But I'll get over it. I met a gal last week that's helping me recover. Matter of fact, she even *looks* a little like Alice. Maybe that's why I'm interested."

"Glad to hear it," Kevin said. "And about this other thing—well, I'll report your idea to Kris Borenson, over at Rickover Hospital. Maybe he'll get some nourishment out of the thought."

"I hope so," O'Brien said grimly. "This thing gives me the creeps."

Kevin clapped him on the shoulder and went to the door. "See you soon," he said.

"Not if I see you first," O'Brien answered.

They were the last words he ever addressed to Kevin Chumm.

Dr. Kris Borenson studied Kevin's anguished face, and sighed. Then he offered the ex-major a cigarette. Kevin took it, but forgot to light it.

"This man you speak of," Borenson said gently. "Was he a very close friend?"

"I couldn't say that. But he was a friend. A young man, vital, full of life and ambition. Just three days before it happened, he was speaking to me about the epidemic; had some kind of cock-eyed theory he'd worked out with graphs and charts. The next time I saw him—" He looked towards the window, as if the sight of the open sky brought relief from the pain in his eyes. There had to be some solution to this nightmare.

"How old was he?"

"Not more than twenty-five, I'd say. And smart, too; like all the rest." His voice went heavy with emotion. "What's doing it, Doctor? What's making these men go mad?"

"I wish I knew," Borenson sighed. "I wish to God I knew." He leaned forward. "You say he was working on some theory about the illness. What sort of theory?"

Kevin gestured with the unlit cigarette. "Oh, I don't know exactly. Something about the fact that there was no madness in those places where there were no women. I don't know how he figured that out."

Borenson's fingers paddled the desk.

"Why?" Kevin said sharply. "Do you think there's something

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to it? Does that theory make sense?"

"It's something we had already determined," Borenson said guardedly. "But nobody really has proved the connection."

"You're hiding something, Doctor."

"No, no. I am only sparing you from wild surmising—"

"Don't spare me anything! I want to find out, Doctor. I want to know why I've lost three friends to madness within the past year—"

"Nothing can be proved. It's only a fact, an isolated, lonely fact. Most of the psychiatrists deny its importance . . ."

"What is it?"

Borenson looked at him gravely.

"Most of these men were bachelors, Major. Only a handful were married. Yet from what I have seen in the testimony of their friends and relatives, it appears as if a great number of them had only recently met . . . someone."

Kevin felt chilled.

"Someone? What do you mean?"

"Some young woman. An attractive woman, by all accounts; someone they were profoundly interested in. The significance of it is far from plain, but it has happened . . ."

Kevin was thinking. "O'Brien," he said.

"What?"

"This man I told you about. The last time I saw him, he told me that he had met a new girl—someone who was taking his mind off the loss of his old girlfriend. Taking his mind . . ."

"Please," Borenson said, hastily, "don't make any wild guesses about this. I have been accused of some mad thinking on the subject myself. It's an impossible notion . . ."

"What notion?"

"Please, Major—"

"You've got to tell me!"

Borenson looked away.

"Vampires," he said, with a snort. "Some twisted form of vampire; that's the word they've chosen for my theory. And yet it's not far from being quite descriptive. Some kind of parasite, feeding upon men's intelligence the way vampires feed upon men's blood . . ."

Kevin stared at the back of the doctor's head.

"You can't be serious . . ."

"I've already admitted that my theory is not in general acceptance."

"Yet you believe it? That these — women — are draining the minds of men? That they're victims of some kind of horror—"

"Be careful," Dr. Borenson chuckled. "They'll be clapping *you* into a cell next if you go on talking that way. I've been looked at suspiciously myself." He stood up. "No, Major. I have no proof whatever of this elaborate idea. It seemed to fit the facts, that's all. But I will be patient until the truth emerges; somehow, it always does."

That night, Kevin waited at

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the bar of Denton's restaurant for his dinner date with Alice Spencer; a late meeting at the publishing house had delayed her. He stood at the polished counter, and watched the smiling, well-dressed people go in and out, the beautiful young women and their escorts. And somehow, the beautiful young women seemed different that night . . .

He was just finishing his second drink when he saw the redheaded girl enter. She was holding tight to the arm of a grinning young man in evening dress; they laughed as if the evening were a celebration of some kind. But there was something about the tilt of her head, the way her eyes flashed from blue to purple in the subdued light . . . something haunting . . .

Then he knew what it was. The girl looked like Areesa.

He slapped some money on the bar and followed them into the dining room. The headwaiter tried to show him to a table, but he brushed him aside. The couple was just sitting down; he stared boldly at them.

The resemblance was faint, but it was there.

"Something I can do for you?" The young man wasn't grinning anymore.

"No—no, nothing," Kevin said, moving away. Then an impulse came. "Don't I know you?" he said to the man. "Didn't we go to school together or something?"

"I don't think so—"

"What's your name?"

"Really . . ." the girl murmured.

"My name's Hal Conti," the man said. "What's yours?"

Kevin Chumm didn't answer. He returned to the bar, and had himself another drink. By the time Alice Spencer arrived, he was well on his way to being thoroughly soused.

He came across the man's name again, only five days later. It was in the newspapers, in a list which seemed to grow longer every day.

NEW VICTIMS OF MENTAL AILMENT

Richard L. Prasser
Manford Gold
Victor Collins
Hal J. Conti

He was afraid to call Dr. Borenson and tell him of his discovery, afraid of what it meant. But Borenson called him first.

"Something just happened," Borenson said crisply. "Something I can't understand, Major . . ."

"What is it?"

"One of the new victims is a man named Robert Iverson, a graduate engineer. He had a brother, and in speaking to him, I learned that Iverson had also met a young lady just prior to the onset of his ailment. But there was something else. He said that he had never met the woman, that his brother had been secretive about her, and that the woman had never permitted any

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photos of herself to be taken, even though Iverson was something of an expert photographer. But Iverson had done something. He had taken a picture of her without her knowledge, using a miniature camera . . ."

"Yes," Kevin said, suddenly aware of what Borenson was going to say next. "What happened?"

"He showed me the photograph. I could hardly believe it, Major. But the resemblance was so distinct . . ."

"Go on," Kevin said. "It looked like Areesa, didn't it?"

"Yes," Dr. Borenson said numbly. "It looked like Areesa."

There was a long pause. Then Kevin said:

"I have to see you, Doctor. I think I know what's been happening. I have to see you right away."

"I'll be there in an hour."

"You were right, Doctor," Kevin Chumm said. "We're being victimized by a vampire. I've thought about it until I'm almost crazy myself—"

"You must get hold of yourself, Major. You don't look well—"

"The ship that came from Coltura didn't bring a beautiful blonde from space, Doctor. It brought a monster, a thing more terrible than the ugliest slug that ever crawled under an Earth rock. The beautiful package that contained it was only a disguise, a mock-up of bone and flesh that would be approved by us. But it was a *thing*. A thing that drew life from the human mind, that fed upon human intelligence the way an animal feeds on meat. And it was cunning—I know how cunning. It set about to achieve its purpose with the subtlety of the serpent. It came among us in the form of a beautiful, desirable woman . . . and it attracted men the way the spider attracts flies. And then it ate its meal, Doctor. Knowledge. Mind power. Intelligence. Whatever you call it. And when it was sated, it threw the husks away. That's what has been filling your hospital wards, Doctor Borenson. Husks. The leavings of that . . . *thing* from Coltura . . ."

"Yes," Borenson whispered, nodding his head. "Yes, I know it's true . . ."

"It started with Captain Warner and Captain Carey. It came from somewhere in the cosmos, and ripped into their minds, tore out every shred of knowledge it could find there. It found its own form in their brain, Doctor. The form of a beautiful blonde woman, the kind of woman that all men would admit into their hearts and minds without question . . . It took that form, and came to Earth. But there was more than one Areesa. Areesa was only the spore-carrier. When she died, there were a hundred, maybe a thousand others to carry on the destiny of her species. But the thing's made a mistake, Doctor. It's left the stamp of Areesa on the faces of these vampire-women. That's how we

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will know them . . . that's how we ll destroy them . . ."

"Yes. Yes," Borenson said. "It must be done. We must prove it to the world, and then we must destroy them . . ." He stood up. "Major, I want you to come with me. I want you to speak with certain people at the psychiatric association, people with high government connections. We must get official recognition of the truth, at once. Before it's too late."

"I can't go now. Not now, Doctor. There's something I have to do."

"You *must* go now. We can't afford to wait any longer."

Kevin rubbed his eyes.

"All right," he said dully. "I'll come now."

Three days later, a woman was arrested for no apparent reason on the streets of Culver City. Similar arrests took place in Chicago, Dallas, and New York. Even the officials who made the arrests weren't aware of the reasons for them, but they were even more perplexed by the instructions to carry out complete X-rays on the unwilling prisoners.

A week later, not even the security precautions of the government could hide the news from the world.

The X-rays were blank.

What followed was the most extraordinary police hunt in history—a diligent search for women with certain features, with sometimes subtle resemblances to the blonde creature which had come from the other end of space to eat away the minds of men. The chase was conducted all over the world, and no official word was ever given as to the fate of the women who failed to pass the X-ray examinations. But Kevin Chumm knew the fate was extermination. And it was Kevin Chumm who took Alice Spencer prisoner.

When he knocked on the door of her apartment, he found her waiting for him.

"I know," she said coldly. "I've heard about it. I suppose you've come to get me."

Kevin couldn't look at her. He turned his face away, as if to conceal the pain that was evident in his eyes.

"Do you love me, Kevin?"

"Stop that!" he grated.

"Do you love me?"

"I did. I thought I loved Areesa, too. And all I loved was some nameless thing . . ."

"Look at me, Kevin."

He looked at her. The effort was great.

"Do you really think I could be that? A thing?" She smiled slightly, and the smile was like a knife wound.

"You look just like her," he said harshly. "More like her than any of them."

"And what if the X-rays prove I'm human? Will that convince you? Or will you be too afraid to take the chance?"

"Don't make me suffer, Alice. Whatever you are, have some pity . . ."

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"I knew a man like you once," she said thoughtfully. "His duty was more important to him than anything else—even love. You've probably met him; he was in the space command, too."

"Let's go, Alice."

"His name was George Warner. We met when we were in high school together. Did you know him, Kevin?"

He looked at her sharply.

"Who? What was his name?"

"Warner. Gig, we called him. You must know him; he was quite famous once . . ."

"Of course, I know him! It was Gig who—" He stopped, and then rushed forward to clutch her arms. "Alice! Alice, for God's sake, don't you see what happened?"

She looked frightened.

"It was *your* image that was in Gig's mind. It was *your* image the creature saw when it found Gig and Carey on Mars. And that's the image it adopted, that is where the blonde from space found her beauty . . ."

"I don't understand—"

"But I do!" Kevin Chumm said. "Please—let's prove it once and for all."

"All right," Alice Spencer said softly.

Three hours later, the X-ray series was completed. Kevin Chumm took one look at them, and went racing down the corridor of the hospital towards the room where Alice Spencer waited. Then he drew her into his arms and kissed her.

"The pictures . . . ?" she said.

"Most beautiful pin-up pictures I ever saw," he answered.

THE END

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DOLCE AL FINE

By JACK SHARKEY

Here is one of the most original "end-of-the-world" stories we've ever read, an incisive vignette that illumines the soul of man.

LADISLOS began to stir beneath the coarse, frozen matting of the fur quilt. Stiff and irregular, it barely served to keep his raggedly swathed body free of contact with the nightly snows, the snows that fell increasingly more softly, more thickly. The cold had long lost its power to make him shiver. Even trembling used up energy, and his body seemed to sense that it had to rely solely on whatever fuel it had been able to store up while there was still food.

He felt Johansen, curled near to him, twitch in his sleep, and then awaken. He heard the little whimperings as Johansen beat the dry white surfaces of his palms together, trying to pound into them more warmth than they'd been able to absorb from his body, even though he slept with arms crossed tightly, and fingers burrowing deep within his armpits.

"Ladislos?"

Johansen whispered the name as he always did, lately, as though fearful there would be no reply. Even the whisper was a bare suggestion of sound, so that in the event Johansen heard no response, he could convince himself that he hadn't really spoken loudly enough, convince himself that a louder effort would evoke an answer. And then, once he was convinced, he would not call again, for a second answering silence would tell Johansen that at last he, Eric Johansen, was the last man alive on Earth.

"Yes, Eric. I'm here. Your hands . . . Are they all right?"

A sigh seemed to escape between Eric Johansen's lips at

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the voice that sounded in his ears, and he didn't even answer the question. Ladislos could hear him still beating his palms, gone leathery with exposure and a terrible fishbelly white to look upon, and reasoned that when Eric's hands would finally move no more, Eric would tell him. Until that day, it was a waste of breath and energy to ask.

The fur quilt, which even covered their heads, was too rigid to lie flat where its outer edges should have been limply upon the ground. Ladislos could sense, without looking directly, the pallid blue light that lay everywhere beyond the borders of this, their only shelter against the eternal winter that gripped the planet. *Today would be . . .* how did that phrase go, back on that old TV program? . . . a day like any other day, but—? Something like that, Ladislos remembered. The day, Ladislos knew without trying to lift the quilt from them, would be stark and clear and cold. Everywhere he would look once he'd left his brittle fur shelter he would see nothing but an ugly jumble of whiteness extending from the west to the east. There had been a time when he was able to identify, not from sight but from memory, many of the humped shapes that arose about their camp, a solitary diversion in a world of blue ice and white crystalline snow. There had been a time when he knew the precise hummock that hid Elise's grave, the tiny swell that marked the unassailable stump of the last tree they'd cut down for their fire, sawed and hacked and broken almost flush with the surface of the soil itself.

Now, there was nothing but immediate sensation when he emerged from beneath the quilt. No memory to plague him with sorrow and longing that did a man no harm, but no good, either. Ladislos shook his head slowly, looking—had he been able to see himself in a glass—like some great wooly bear. His head was a blue-black tangle of long, almost cordlike hair, mixed and matted and locked in place by the steel grip of ice crystals. It had taken him much too long to come out from under the quilt, Ladislos thought, wearily. Nearly a minute, a full minute, to crawl out of his sleeping place and stand erect upon the endless plane of snow. It was too long.

He and Johansen slept longer and longer periods each day. There just *was* no more food to be had, and yet the omnipresence of falling snows saved them from death by thirst. That mercy was denied them. And the cold, most bitter at night, was by day never enough to drain all their energies away. It had something to do with the ice, Ladislos remembered, fuzzily. It had always seemed an inversion of what *should* be, in nature, that when water froze, it gave off heat. It was only when ice was *melting* that heat was sucked from the surrounding air.

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The glacier to the north was still a barely visible crest that followed the line of the blindingly white horizon, which stung his eyes painfully despite its being only the reflected light of a pale golden sun. To the south, the companion glacier hadn't as yet appeared to give their camp matching borders.

Perhaps, Ladislos thought dimly, we are further north than we'd thought when we came here. They'd hoped they were at the equator, when they first arrived at the campsite. It was impossible to be certain, with everything under its snow blanket. When the depth of the snows was measured not in inches, but in tens of feet, a Canadian Pine was hardly distinguishable from a Coconut Palm.

A hollow scraping sound behind him told Ladislos that Johansen was coming from beneath the fur. Layers of ice and frost and snow had nearly made the quilt unrecognizable as such. Like *papier-maché*, it had molded itself to their slumbering forms, and now held itself stiffly in that impressed shape, fitting the two of them much as a walnut shell fit over the nutmeat itself.

Ladislos did not turn to watch Johansen's struggle to come out from their sleeping place, which they shared to concentrate the feeble emanations of body warmth. Eric would be embarrassed to be seen moving so stiffly and clumsily, he who had once been very much the athlete, lithe of movement and healthy, strong. Also, there was no need to turn around. Who else but Eric could it be that Ladislos heard?

Another bear, perhaps? Such as the one from whom they'd made the quilt under which they slept? Ladislos, rather than following this thought into its normal reaction, an apprehensive turn to assure himself that such was not the case, merely found himself dwelling happily upon the incident of that erstwhile bear, and the many weeks—months, perhaps? It was hard to be certain—they had gorged themselves upon the rich, oily flesh of its carcass. Ladislos sighed, remembering those times. That was when they still had fire, and they had cooked the meat (rather recklessly, he felt, in retrospect) upon the sharpened spikes of green twigs, held out over the campfire. (We were fools, thought Ladislos, those twigs might have kept my Elise warm for one more day . . .)

One more day. And for what? To suffer that much longer? To know for another twenty-four hours that they were the last human beings upon the entire planet, that escape was impossible, that the last of the silvery starships had long since departed, crammed almost to the airlocks with the lucky remnants of a threatened humanity who had managed to claw their ways aboard before the blastoff? No,

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Ladislos thought, it were better that she die. And Eric, too. And himself.

"The gloves, Ladislos?" Eric's voice whispered huskily in his ear, not quite concealing a whine of sharp need.

"Yes, Eric, yes." Ladislos said hastily. He began to fumble with the rigid rawhide thongs that laced the thick "gloves" onto his hands, extending partially above the wrist. It was hard work, manipulating the ragged end of thong from where it was tucked under itself. A knot in the thong was out of the question; they'd never have been able to remove the frozen twist of thin leather from his arms, then.

Eric was still slapping one hand against the other, his short, stubby fingers a dull blue-white with the cold. Useless to ask Eric's help in unfastening the layers of wool and shreds of fur that made up the gloves. Eric's fingers were nearly incapable of motion when they arose each day, for almost an hour, sometimes.

Ladislos had ceased, many weeks ago, to feel guilty about wearing the only warm hand-coverings they had, while Eric's fingers gradually lost all their strength. At first, he'd insisted on alternating with Eric in their use, but Eric's miserable sobs, on that one morning when Ladislos's fingers had been unable to perform their functions, had helped him to harden his heart against this false pity.

"When we die, Ladislos," Eric had said, the salty tears frozen upon his blond-furred cheeks, "we must die as Men, not as animals. Your hands are all we have left to remind us of what Man once had, of what Man once was . . ."

Henceforth, Ladislos had worn the wrappings without complaint. And Eric had been happy, even though his own hands were useless as a statue's. The hands of Ladislos were the only hands about which Eric cared, anymore.

The thongs crisped and crackled as he slowly unwound them, being careful lest they should break. He shook the wrappings impatiently from his left hand as they loosened, and his hand, freed of the warm encumbrance, soon had the thong on the right hand removed.

Ladislos stooped and carefully picked up both wrappings and their thongs, and slipped them beneath the edge of the hardened fur quilt. There they would remain until the Ritual was over, and he and Eric returned once more to their cold bed upon the hard-packed snow.

"Can you help?" he asked Eric, shuffling away from the quilt. "I don't know if I can manage alone."

"I will try," said Eric, following him.

The day was clear and bright as they made their way across the snow to a tall mound, not quite so tall as themselves. Ladislos hardly noted the fact

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that a path had been worn in the snows between their sleeping place and the mound, though elsewhere the white powdery stuff had drifted hip-deep and undisturbed.

He reached the mound and began to dust the snows of the previous night from the resilient surface of the wide woolen blanket. He bent and took hold of the edge near the ground, and watched with a stab of pity as Eric tried vainly to grasp the corresponding edge at the far side with fingers grown useless as straw.

Eric, after a futile minute's labors, sat down in the snow and began to cry.

"Never mind, Eric," Ladislos said, soothingly. "I will manage."

Eric's sobs did not abate until Ladislos, after many trips from one side of the mound to the other, had managed to lift the stiffened blanket, a foot at a time on each side, clear of the squarish, brown structure underneath.

Ladislos looked upon it and smiled, gently. It had taken a long time, a time without fire, for them to use even a part of this, their last link with the past. After one particularly agonizing night of icy sleet and stinging cold, they had compromised by unbolting the unnecessary upper lid and breaking it up for a campfire. Then, in succession, had come the upper front lid, and then the lower. Only the barest essentials now remained of it. The bench had gone, much earlier, after they'd been unable to cut any more trees.

Ladislos was thankful that, despite the hundreds of moving parts, it needed no lubrication. Oil would have frozen during the night, and rendered it useless, leaving it just another piece of kindling.

Eric had ceased crying, finally, and just sat upon the snow, like a hopeful child, waiting. Ladislos had to smile. Man *was* more than a mere animal, after all. Had they been bound strictly by the drives of their flesh, they would have long before used this object for its heat-value alone. But, Ladislos thought, gazing with a smile at the incredible blue of the dome of sky, his hair and whiskers, in their ice and snow sheaths, reflecting back the pale glory of the dying sun, Man was more than flesh and bone and blood. Man had hungers stronger than those of physical comforts, physical desires.

It was good, thought Ladislos. To die as a Man was a good thing. He was happier in this knowledge than he'd ever been before in his life.

"Ladislos . . ." said Eric, some of the old enthusiasm back in his weak voice, "*Please* begin! . . ."

With a smile at his friend, Ladislos, the last musician on Earth, leaned toward the last piano and began to play.

THE END

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